QUEER IDENTITY AND TRAVEL AGENCY: PLACE-BASED ARGUMENTS IN THE *IT GETS BETTER PROJECT*

by

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ABSTRACT

Media shape and fuel migratory imaginations and are a powerful resource in self-making for all sorts of persons. The *It Gets Better Project*, a product of contemporary media, provides numerous rich texts produced by both queer and heterosexual subjects that make place-based arguments about how life gets better for queer youth. In this thesis, I explore how notions of marginality and migration are mobilized within and through rhetorics of place within the project. Using an amalgamation of critical rhetoric and queer theory, and particularly through the application of Scott Herring's concept of metronormativity, I examine the ways in which mythologies of geography—specifically, around rurality and urbanity—are configured in interesting and revealing ways for queer identity.

Through a close reading of 100 video samples, my analysis yields a problematic of queerness articulated around place through the rhetorical anchors of safety, innocence, and authenticity. While urbanity is asserted as a place of safety, love, and creativity, rurality is structured as the direct opposite; the small town becomes a symbol for hostility, homophobia, and conformity. The queer individual emerges from these associations with the city as a creative agent, yet one whose self-worth is conflated with work, and more specifically, power and profit. Furthermore, culturally received notions of childhood innocence are troubled and inverted within the narratives, revealing

childhood as not innocent, pure, or chaste. In this inversion, queer adulthood retains the mythical wonder of childhood; queer adulthood in the city maintains the wonder, magic, and social validation that was absent for the narrators in their youth. However, the love, magic, and discovery rearticulated with queer identity are contingent on the suppression and erasure of queer sexuality in both youth and adulthood. The narrow construction of queer identity rearticulated within the project produces an "authentic" queer identity, one that is almost exclusively based within the city and, interestingly, crafts queerness as ahistorical. Notably, the agency, creativity, asexuality, and ahistoricity of queerness that are articulated in the *It Gets Better Project* valorize and deify queerness, but specifically in ways that tame and contain it.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

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INTRODUCTION

The global state of migration in the contemporary world has engendered a "wellspring" of rapid relocation along social and transnational levels (Appadurai 1996, p. 6). Today more than ever, people imagine the possibility of living, working, and thriving in places where they were not born. Imaginaries of place, both positive and negative, have long been pervasive, even preceding media, and media have provided greater fodder for creating realities of memory and desire. Media shape and fuel migratory imaginations and are a powerful resource in self-making for all sorts of persons. Modern subjectivities are reconfigured through the intensified media flow as increasingly unstable and mobile. Pervasive mediated imagery and texts allow scripts of safer neighborhoods, greater economic opportunity, and glamorous Hollywood film plots to permeate the global population, providing material for "self-imagining as an everyday social project" (Appadurai 1996, p. 4). Mediated articulations of place may draw people to certain nations or regions searching opportunity, as well as connect people who have migrated to their previous home. Marginalized populations may be driven to migrate seeking the fulfillment of these mediated desires, memories, and identities.

I would like to examine how notions of marginality and migration are mobilized within and through rhetorics of place. This thesis will be a critical rhetorical exploration into how place is constructed as a rhetorical anchor in the gay imaginary and for queer

identity. Queer diasporas in particular bring the force of the imagination, as both memory and desire, into the lives of many ordinary queer subjects as these new imaginaries exist with collectives of people. To this end, the *It Gets Better Project* provides numerous rich texts produced by both queer and heterosexual subjects that make place-based arguments about how life gets better for queer youth. In response to the gay suicide "epidemic,"[1] syndicated radio host Dan Savage and his husband Terry Miller created the *It Gets Better Project* originally as a forum for gay and lesbian adults to reach out to gay and lesbian youth through video narratives capturing a better gay adult life. The video project demonstrates the power of the imagination as it takes a part in the efforts of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) youth to construct their own lives and identities through a rhetorical relationship to place. In this project, I would like to examine the ways in which mythologies of geography—specifically, around rurality and urbanity—are configured in interesting and revealing ways for queer identity. The value of this scholarship lies in its potential to illuminate the rhetorical relationships of place to identity, and specifically to queer identity.

In this introduction, I will lay out my theoretical and methodological foundations for this project. Theoretically, I am grounded in rhetorical theories of place and critical perspectives on place and identity, including political geography. Critical rhetoric as a methodology will allow me to explore the rhetorics of power within the project, as well as provide the tools for a close reading of the video narratives.

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[1] Although the news reported on the September 2010 series of gay suicides as an epidemic, queer youth had been bullied and committing suicides prior to this moment. According to the Trevor Project, LGBTQ youth are four times more likely to attempt suicide than straight teens, and 9 out of 10 LGBTQ youth have experienced harassment at school.

Theoretical Foundations

Thomas J. St. Antoine writes (2007), "The rhetoric of place is an intersection between the ideal and the real (Perry & Liggett, 1995), providing an opportunity for rhetoricians to reconnect with material realities" (p. 130). Although theories of place and space have been taken up across disciplines and from a variety of perspectives, the focus of this study is on the rhetorical dimensions of place, in particular as relevant to identity; accordingly, I engage here that relevant literature.

Endres and Senda-Cook (2011) articulate place as "particular locations" such as a city, a neighborhood, or a park that are "semi-bounded, a combination of material and symbolic qualities, and embodied" (p. 259). These sites often change over time and are experienced daily by those who inhabit those places. Space, conversely, is a more general concept that refers to how "society and social practice are regulated" or disciplined (Endres & Senda-Cook, 2011, p. 260). The creation of space is a process that involves constant reconstruction and, sometimes, deconstruction (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 26). Moreover, "places exist in the interrelationship with spaces" for "even though every city is a particular locality with its own unique material, symbolic, and embodied qualities, every city is also part of a spatial system that links localities into broader social structures and practices" (Endres & Senda-Cook, 2011, p. 260). Therefore, a city may have its own particular structures such as parks, buildings, and so on, and functions as a particular locality, but the city is necessarily still subject to broader social structures such as political economic flows and forces. Each of these concepts, space and place, are influenced by and also influence each other (Blair, Dickinson & Ott, 2010, p. 23). Both

space and place are socially constructed and imbued with meaning. Rhetorical theories of place are especially salient for this project as relevant to identity because rhetoric about a place influences how individuals engage with places and understand themselves through the process of placing themselves in space (St. Antoine, 1997, p. 130).

Rhetorical Perspectives on Place

Some rhetoricians have engaged rhetorics of place as an argumentative strategy. Place-based arguments "discursively invoke images or memories of a place to support an argument…and make salient that dominant place meanings are sometimes linked to systems of power… " (Endres & Senda-Cook, 2011, p. 258). This strategy has been used, for example, by environmental organizations who have deployed the concept of the lotus to evoke the unique and precarious nature of places (Cox, 1982), thereby bestowing particular value on wildernesses frequented by humans (Endres & Senda-Cook, 2011, p. 265).

Place-based arguments are unique in that material presence is not necessary for persuasion, as places may be evoked through language. In his study of books, advertisements, and articles promoting new urban communities, St. Antoine (1997) argues that new urban rhetoric positioned new urban developments as antisuburban, while offering residents "the same old suburban hell" (p. 128). Mocking the ideals of suburbia to make a case for new urbanism, texts contrasted the individualism and privacy of the suburbs to the sense of community they argued could be found in new urban developments. In this way, negative place-based arguments of suburbia have been used in an attempt to persuade residents to join the new urbanism movement. Furthermore, place-

based arguments as a rhetorical strategy in the *It Gets Better Project* appeal to nonphysically present places to make claims about identity for LGBTQ youth.

Rhetorical studies of place also have addressed issues relevant to identity. Issues of identity and power come to a head around the rhetoric of place, which "draws a distinction between the self and the other and profoundly influences race, gender, class, and social relations" (St. Antoine, 2007, p. 129). In analyzing the relationship between place and identity, some literature focuses on collective cultural identity. Scholars have found that intersectional identity markers necessarily influence the ways that people experience places. Schely-Newman's (1997) study of Israeli women showed that one's identity is closely related to the space one occupies, as these women used stories about locale to constitute a collective identity. Even sites of discursive battles, such as the Gaza and West Bank during Intifada, became the vehicles by which Palestinians could preserve their own identity by acknowledging the existence of a Palestinian State (Hasain & Flores, 1997). These examples bring the force of place in negotiations between self and community, illustrating that place is closely linked with intersectional identity markers of gender, race, class, nation, and ability.

Subsequently, mediated discourses of place-based arguments feature symbolic representations attached to collective identity. For example, the construction of West Hollywood as a "gay city" was affected by the ways in which the gay press characterized a new gay identity. Forest (1995) writes, "In defining a new gay identity, the gay press utilized the holistic quality of place to weave together the 'natural' and cultural elements of West Hollywood. This idealized 'gay city' united the place's real and imagined physical attributes with social and personal characteristics of gay men" (p. 133). As

described by the gay press, West Hollywood took on qualities of intellect and morality, such that the city became part of a new identity forged for gay men within this narrative. Forest's study reveals the powerful and ongoing "symbolic and representational struggle over the sexual meanings associated with particular places" (Knopp, 1992, p. 652). In this sense, the physical and social characteristics of place may be deeply tied to collective identity through the specific deployment of argument and imagination.

Mediated representations of place also influence individual subjectivities. Rhetorical scholars have noted that identity is created out of the immense mediated resources that constitute our contemporary global culture (Burgin, 1996; Dickinson, 2006). Mediated discourses do not simply frame our experiences of a place, but condition our experiences in that place (Dickinson, 2006, p. 214). Greg Dickinson's (2006) rhetorical analysis of the film *Pleasantville* shows the power that texts have to urge us to understand the suburbs in certain ways. He found that the "spatial imagination," which organizes material spaces (Grossberg, 1993, p. 8), can also be found in the form of a "suburban imagination" that offers a framework for "the good life" and guidelines for relationships (Dickinson, 2006, p. 216). *Pleasantville* crafts a safe, memory-tinged White suburbia that offers security and acceptance. Through images of "white heterosexuality leavened with a just a bit of danger and risk offered by 'aberrant' sexuality and the authenticity of 'other' racial and ethnic identities," the film becomes a resource for understanding the nuances of the purported good life within suburbia (Dickinson, 2006, p. 217). Mediated discourses rely on and help create spatial imaginations that mark identity categories within particular places. The text prompts the question, "Who am I in

relation to others?", showing that individual subjectivity is determined by others in relation to place.

To apply this configuration of individual subjectivity, how one identifies as queer in relation to others is based on her or his relation to the collective identity of individuals defined by place. For example, the creation of San Francisco as a gay "homeland" chronicles participation in a gay imaginary that holds the city as a designation of LGBTQ individuals as a "people" (Weston, 1995, p. 257). Rhetorical constructions of places have immense impact on the ways that LGBTQ individuals have constituted themselves as subjects. Weston found a common trend in gay and lesbian oral stories: the narrative of "the only one in the world" was replaced by the conviction that there were others like the individual, queer like her or him, *somewhere*. Weston writes, "'Like' others come spatially located at the very point a person enters the gay imaginary" (Weston, 1995, p. 281). Notably, these places included California, Chicago, and New York. In this sense, the gay imaginary is absolutely spatialized. Moreover, from pride parades to *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, mediated representations of the gay subject almost always locate her or him in urban environments (Weston, 1995, p. 282). Specific historical and material forces contributed to the status of the city in the gay imaginary, and mediated discourses continue to uphold this particular representation. The *It Gets Better Project* provides an opportunity to track more closely the rhetorical relevance of place to the gay imaginary in constituting LGBTQ subjectivities.

Critical Perspectives of Place and Identity

Because multiple conflicting imaginations coexist and compete for representation, critical rhetorical perspectives of place examine issues of marginalization and privilege as central to questions of identity and power. In light of contemporary global flows and migratory patterns, physical place as an anchor for identity is no longer as accessible or viable as historically, such that a place imaginary becomes highly salient. The fracturing of place as a fixed indication of identity has special implications as relevant to power. In this vein, the concept of "diaspora" highlights the overlapping issues of displacement and marginalization as it describes the movement of people away from ancestral homelands. Within the highly diasporic cultures many find themselves, familiar lines between cities and towns, centers and margins, become blurred.

Where these taken-for-granted borders become blurred, "the cultural certainties and fixities of the metropole are upset as surely, if not the same way, as those of the colonized periphery" (Gupta & Ferguson, 1992, p. 10). Because of this, scholars have noted, "It is not only the displaced who experience a displacement" (Bhabha, 1989, p. 66; as cited in Gupta & Ferguson, 1992, p. 10). What was thought culturally stable and unitary has become eroded, and the supposed natural connectedness between people and places is problematized by the highly migratory population. Here, as Gupta and Ferguson (1992) point out, it becomes most apparent how imagined communities come to be attached to imagined places as displaced individuals search for imagined homelands (pp.10-11). This phenomenon has led scholars such as Edward Said (1979) to claim a "general condition of homelessness" across the globe performed through the bodies of migrants, workers, and wanderers (p. 19). Where place becomes an unstable marker of

identity, the imagination works through complex historical, social, and cultural dynamics in specific groups to help shape identities.

The economic impetus for global migration further contributes to the fracturing of neat identifications. Dorothy Allison (1994) reflects upon her own class history, from growing up poor in rural South Carolina to being the first in her family to attend college and feeling like an imposter in a middle-class environment. The need to belong, Allison describes, was so strong that she felt driven to hide the poverty she knew behind shame and an immense fear of being discovered as poor (Allison, 1994, p. 33). As Allison's narrative shows, issues of marginalization and migration converge around class. The movement in class status and physical movement in location came at the price of feeling perpetually out of place. The feeling of placelessness prompted by marginalisation is addressed within the *It Gets Better Project*, and, through rhetorical constructions of urbanity, LGBTQ youth are invited to imagine belonging to a queer community.

A queer interrogation of identity grapples with these same complex and often competing issues and imaginaries. Judith Butler (2004) writes, "More important than any presupposition about the plasticity of identity or indeed its retrograde status is queer theory's claim to be opposed to the unwanted legislation of identity" (p. 7). As Butler makes apparent, any identity, even a queer one, obscures particularities and still maintains its position within the confines of power and normativity. Therefore, she writes, "If I am always constituted by norms that are not of my making, then I have to understand the ways that constitution takes place" (Butler, 2004, p. 15). Queer interrogations of place question the ways in which identity is forged to locale through a reading of power. For example, while reasons for migration are varied and permeate

many cultural groups and identities, specifically the significance of economic constraints on migration, queer individuals differ from other migrants in the sense that "there is no homeland that can validate a queer group identity" (Cant, 1997, p. 1*)*. Place is significant to queer identity in that it must be imagined, invented, and reconstructed as a homeland.

Consequently, feminist and queer theorists point out that the bracketing of 'the home' as a safe space in the private sphere is dangerous to LGBTQ individuals (Kentlyn, 2008, p. 327). As Dorothy Allison illustrates through her story of feeling always out-of-place as a poor lesbian in a lesbian middle-class environment and out-of-place as a poor lesbian in a heterosexual working-class environment, there is a queerness of home and the individual may never be at home where s/he is placed. In this way, a queer critique resists dominant heteronormative assumptions about place and identity. As my project necessitates a thoughtful analysis of power in its relation to mediated discourses of place, a queer interrogation will illuminate Butler's inquiry into the ways that identities are constituted.

Political Geography

The spatial politics of geography cover a broad range of inquiries and diverse theories. Research in political geography includes politics of the environment, identity, landscapes, representation, political economy, peace and conflict studies, and critical, feminist, and queer geopolitics. Theories within political geography have a vested interest in interrogating the power dynamics in spatial constructions through an intersectional approach. Indeed, the critical edge of geographical work interrogates classed, raced, and

gendered dimensions of spaces (Forest, 1995, Kentlyn, 2008, Knopp, 1992, Oswin, 2008, Wright, 2010).

In analyzing the complex relationship between space and power, some political geographers have interwoven queer theory and critical geography. Using poststructuralist queer theory, Jasbir Puar (2002) leveled an important critique of valuing queer constituents as cosmopolitan consumers in diverse locales by exposing the effects of queer gentrification on people of color. Puar (2002) writes, "While it is predictable that the claiming of queer space is lauded as the disruption of heterosexual space, rarely is that disruption interrogated also as a disruption of racialized, gendered, and classed spaces" (p. 936). The claiming or occupying of any space is a process informed by histories of colonization and, as such, the claiming of queer space is not excluded from this citational power to wound other marginalized groups. This critique is particularly poignant for the creation of imagined homelands for LGBTQ populations, such as the Castro in San Francisco, Toronto's "Gay Village," "gay Cape Town," where "the appearance of homogeneity conceals exclusionary practices predicated on other axes of difference" (Oswin, 2008, p. 95). Thus, gay and lesbian spaces do not necessarily transgress the normative, and may create segregated spaces of exclusion that reinforce White homonormativity.[2]

How have LGBTQ individuals used these sites—San Francisco, the Gay Village, gay Cape Town, and urbanized spaces at large—to construct themselves as a people?

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[2] The mainstream LGBTQ movement is engaged in what Lisa Duggan calls "homonormativity," or supporting consumerism, neoliberalism, capitalism, and political assimilation (Duggan, 2003, p. 50). This assimilationist narrative revolves around the idea of effectiveness through reform, whereby through normalizing queer families, LGBTQ individuals will obtain not only economic benefits, but social capital and symbolic benefits as well.

Weston (1995) examines the "Great Gay Migration" of the 1970s and early 1980s, which witnessed tens of thousands of lesbians and gay men move into major urban areas, and the power of urban/rural contrasts in constituting lesbian and gay subjects. She found that within the U.S.-based "gay imaginary," the city has come to symbolize tolerance and community, while the country is (re)articulated as a space of both homophobia and gay absence (Weston, 1998, p. 45). Weston (1995) writes, "…San Francisco became the focal point of an imagined rather than spatially determined community… represented a homeland that could enlist the nostalgia of people who had never seen the Golden Gate" (p. 200). The city has been centralized in the standardized narrative of gay migration as individuals constructed themselves as "gay people." The imagined gay homeland that cities like San Francisco began embodying further polarized the city from the country. Such gay migration is described as metronormative, or "a travel narrative that demands a predetermined flight to the city," wherein the mythology holds that rural-identified queers will find sexual freedom, communal visibility, and entry into a gay village "whose streets are paved with rainbow pride" (Herring, 2010, p. 15). To the extent that individuals constituting themselves as gay subjects enter the urban environment as differently classed, race, and gendered beings, their trajectory to feel safe and find community is complicated beyond sexuality.

Queer geographies show that the experiences of the embodied self meet with processes of identity and power across global and local places. Constituting subjectivity within any place is a performance that is necessarily impacted by geographical imaginations of that place, which are influenced by global mediated discourses. For queer individuals, the gay imaginary holds a mythography of urban escape as a means through

which subjects become "gay people." I am interested in how social actors within the *It Gets Better Project* negotiate gay imaginaries of place in their constitution of themselves as queer subjects. How do the rhetorical anchors of urbanity and rurality within the project uphold or challenge normative constructions of queer subjects? What is the usefulness of urban/rural dialectics in crafting a gay imaginary and constituting queer subjectivity?

While scholars in the field of communication have studied place-as-rhetoric (Blair, 2007; Endres & Senda-Cook, 2011) and place-based arguments in environmental campaigns (Cox, 1982), less attention has been paid to the constitutive power of place-based arguments, especially as relevant to identity, and particularly of individuals as queer subjects. How do the rhetorical constructions of rurality and urbanity contribute to queer subjects' ability to "root" themselves in an imagined home and community? Drawing upon critical and queer interrogations of place through a rhetorical lens, and in particular employing Herring's (2010) concept of metronormativity, I will trace the metanarrative of gay migration through the *It Gets Better Project* videos to understand how the axes of safety, innocence, and authenticity shift meanings from the rural to the urban.

Method

Following McKerrow's (1989) theoretical rationale for a critical rhetoric, a critical rhetorical framework is best informed by both theory and praxis. Thus, through a critique of both domination and freedom, critical research can make "explicit the dense web connecting seemingly unrelated forces in society" (Mosco, 1983, p. 239). A critique

of domination acknowledges the Foucauldian notion that those who are dominated may both participate in and resist the social structure. In analyzing the social actors' narratives within the *It Gets Better Project*, I considered the sociopolitical forces that color the narratives. As a product of the mainstream LGBTQ movement, the *It Gets Better Project* emerges in a specific historical and political moment that necessarily influences the content.

Further, a critique of freedom illuminates the ways that social relations both constrain and enable us. How are effects of truth "produced within discourses which are themselves neither true nor false?" (Foucault, 1980; McKerrow, 1989, p. 100). An analysis into the ways that the gay imaginary both resists the "normal" order and maintains its institutional knowledge can get at the ways that gay identity shifts in its relation to power. In order to accomplish this, I identify rhetorical symbolics rearticulated throughout the *It Gets Better Project* in the construction of a spacialized gay imaginary. These two critiques, domination and freedom, are particularly useful in analyzing the ways that queer people rhetorically constitute themselves as subjects through symbolic anchors of urbanity and rurality.

In line with these critical rhetorical interrogations, a queer critique seeks to understand how certain norms and categories are deployed in relation to power structures. Queer examinations have attempted to denaturalize the present and question the legitimacy of universalizing identity as a political strategy (Sedgwick, 1990, p. 27). I wish to engage with queer inquiries that "entail radical (re)thinkings, (re)drawings, (re)conceptualizations, (re)mappings that could (re)make bodies, spaces and geographies" (Browne, 2006, p. 888). In this way, a queer critique has the potential to be transgressive

and disruptive to systems of power. A queer critique is especially useful to interrogate the ways that social actors within the *It Gets Better Project* both constrain and enable LGBTQ youth by giving them resources for self-imagining through spatial constructions.

Analyzing the *It Gets Better Project*, a product of activists responding to collective trauma, reminds us that interrogations of identity are not only found in academic texts and accessed in elite institutions. As the project includes over 50,000 user-created video submissions, it is a site of everyday discourse that circulates within the public sphere. By studying vernacular rhetorics, the critic engages with local communities as well as the rhetoric of the oppressed (Ono & Sloop, 1995, pp. 19-20). The rhetorical crafting of an identity is a constitutive act, one that occurs in and through vernacular language.

The project's videos, thousands of fragmented narratives, engage in a broader fragmented text that is the *It Gets Better Project*. These textual pieces illustrate the fragmented nature of discourse that McGee (1990) asserts collapse text and context. McGee (1980) writes, "Social movement is a set of meanings and not a phenomenon" (p. 233), highlighting the complications embedded in the multiple shifting consciousness of social movements. The text/context of the *It Gets Better Project* becomes blurred as a critical rhetorical method recognizes the video submissions that physically make up the project, as well as the mainstream LGBTQ social movement that ideologically created this particular moment when the project emerged, and even the broader political climate under the Obama Administration as fragments of the artifact. These wider ideological influences enable a queer critique of domination and freedom to examine the ways that bodies are always constituted by multiple competing discourses.

In order to operationalize a critical queer rhetorical method, I performed a close reading of a mostly random sample of 100 videos social actors submitted to the *It Gets Better Project* with the goal of obtaining a wide range of video submissions.[3] However, I purposefully analyzed high-profile celebrity and politicians' videos because of their "top viewed" status (i.e., greatest number of "hits" recorded), which speaks to their pervasiveness and resonance, and thus, representativeness for audiences. Combining critical rhetorical and queer critical approaches, I examined the themes, patterns, associations, and narratives that emerged across this sample of narratives of the IGBP as a rhetorical mobilitization of a larger social movement. I then examined the key themes that emerge based on my analysis to see how they perform rhetorically as anchors in the gay imaginary in relation to place. Finally, I assessed how people employ a discourse that constructs sexual identity through spatial configurations and what this implies for constituting a queer subjectivity. To that end, this project is guided by the follow research questions:

> RQ1: What themes are consistently and prominently associated with place(s) as articulated in the *It Gets Better Project?*
>
> RQ2: How do these rhetorics of place function to shape queer identity in the *It Gets Better Project?*

[3] Because of this limited sample size, the claims made in this analysis are preliminary and may be troubled by a larger sample size of the 50,000 video submissions within the project.

CHAPTER 2

SAFETY IN THE CITY

"Imagine what life could be like in 10 years," Kurt says to Karofsky as the hospital room in small town Ohio fades into a cityscape of skyscrapers. We find ourselves looking out the window of Karofsky's "fantastic office." Kurt's voice follows us into this imagined future; he says, "You're some kind of a successful professional, a lawyer, maybe--" Karofsky interrupts, "Could I be a sports agent?" "Sure," Kurt continues, "You're a big sports agent living in the city of your dreams because you left Lima [Ohio] and never looked back. Your handsome partner comes to visit you in your office and brings along your son" (Brenan, Falchuk, & Murphy, 2012).

The hit Fox show *Glee* has been acclaimed and criticized for addressing culturally salient issues such as antigay bullying, as depicted in the hospital scene where Karofsky is recovering from an attempted suicide. After Kurt's former-high-school-bully-turned-friend Karofsky is outed as gay himself, Karofsky encounters the ultimate role reversal through experiencing the trauma of homophobic bullying, the distress of which eventually leads him to attempt suicide. Offering his support in the hospital, Kurt paints Karofsky a futurist vision of professional success complete with a glamorous family portrait in "the city of your dreams" as a resource for the gay youth to imagine his life

getting better. Whether intentionally or coincidentally, this scene reflects the collective narrative held up in the *It Gets Better Project*; urbanity is centered as a key feature of queer identity, one that furnishes queer individuals with success, family, and love. Consequently, the small town[4] is rhetorically crafted as a foil for the city, as the rural comes to be a symbol for homophobia, hostility, and danger. Safety is a key theme on which this imaginary turns, such that urbanity, if variously defined, is articulated with safety, and rurality with violence.

The videos in the *It Gets Better Project* uphold a narrative of the city as the route through which LGBTQ youth experience safety from the violence of the small town. Apparent in the original video posted by Dan Savage and Terry Miller and across a diversity of submissions, the narrative gleaned from the project demonizes small towns as hotbeds of homophobia. A major apparatus through which the gay imaginary is held up in this project is "metronormativity." Scott Herring (2010) describes metronormativity as "a travel narrative that demands a predetermined flight to the city" wherein the mythology holds that rural-identified queers will find sexual freedom, communal visibility, and entry into a gay village "whose streets are paved with rainbow pride" (p. 15). The implication is that nonurban environments are oppressive, and this is borne out explicitly across submissions. Safety is a predominant feature in metronormativity as the small town is denigrated to a place of filth, hostility, and violence.

In this chapter, I will first examine how violence is consistently tied to rurality, through individuals and institutions, as well as literal and figurative geographies. Then, I

[4] the "small town" is a vague, abstract concept that encompasses pretty much anything smaller than a metropolis—including enclaves or provinces of metropolises. These distinctions are blurred such that "small town" becomes a material, place-based signifier of closed communities.

will trace how the city is constituted in opposition to the confinement of the small town through education and success, which crafts a queer identity centered on individuality. Agency in the form of mobility and individual success is thus a guarantor of queer safety. Finally, I identify the neoliberal sensibilities that undergird this collective geographic imaginary as it is centered on the axis of safety.

Rural Trials

Individual Violence

Within the *It Gets Better Project*, small towns are illustrated as, if not the root of homophobia, then a greenhouse for its cultivation. Importantly, homophobia is rearticulated as not merely the product of bigoted individuals, but rather an ominous and dangerous threat to LGBTQ youth, one that necessarily places their bodies at risk. A clear rhetorical form that danger takes throughout the narratives of the videos is manifested in "the bully," or individual homophobic peers. Miller describes growing up in Spokane, Washington, "which is a midsize town with a small-town mentality," as a place where he was bullied "mercilessly" in school (Dan & Terry, 2010). He retells harrowing stories of physical abuse within the unsafe space of his school. Miller says, "People were really cruel to me. I was bullied a lot: beat up, thrown against walls and lockers and windows, stuffed into bathroom stalls. People shit on my car, people scratched my car, broke my windows" (Dan & Terry, 2010). Across submissions, narrators recount a range of violence, from verbal abuse in the form of "dyke," "fag," "homo," "nerd," "a waste," (Apple employees, 2011; It Gets Better Canada, 2010), to physical violence so extreme that "there were days when I was pretending to be sick just because I was too afraid to go

to school" (Google employees, 2010). Individual bullies are articulated across submissions as a dramatic threat to LGBTQ youth, especially at school; from the locker rooms to the parking lots, LGBTQ bodies were always at risk. These were particular locations where peers congregated, thus extending their looming threat of violence over the entire school.

The bully is a mainstay of the rural imaginary in these narratives, naturalizing the idea that growing up LGBTQ in a rural place is "nobody's idea of easy" (Minneapolis Musical Theatre, 2011). This is affirmed in the narratives through depictions of the small town as "dirty, grungy, icky," "not the greatest place for a gay guy like me," (Hunter, 2011) and "Anchorage has snow, and hunting, and rednecks, and snow, and that's about it" (Eric, 2010). Descriptions of the small town constantly reify the notion that it is a dangerous place for queer bodies. Further, the danger of rurality is often described in terms of audience prior awareness and agreement. Nick says, "Growing up in a small town as the somewhat obviously gay boy is not necessarily the easiest thing in the world," (Nick, 2010). An unnamed lesbian echoes Nick's sentiments, "I grew up in small-town, conservative Wisconsin; not exactly the best environment for a young gay girl (UntitledSymphony, 2010)." The narratives share sentiments about the small town as an obvious place of "horror and degradation," in such a way that positions the audience as similarly metronormative (Halberstam ,2005, p. 24).

Beyond naturalizing the idea that rural spaces are homophobic, socially conservative, and just plain dirty, rurality emerges as a confining space—as small minded as it is small geographically--where any deviance from White heterosexuality is punishable. Sister Amanda Rekinwith, a drag queen in San Diego, says, "When I grew

up, very cliché, in a small Midwestern town of about 30,000 people, in a high school where my graduating class was 22, I was the most different one of them all. I was always ridiculed by various different ways—being Irish-Catholic, being Asian, being different" (Bears San Diego, 2011). Social actors reveal that in these rural places, there was just "no allowance for someone to be different" (Apple employees, 2011). Within the confining space of the rural, "fitting in" is vocalized as the only option. For example, an unnamed Google employee says:

> I'm a transsexual woman. I grew up in rural Canada in really conservative surroundings, rather conservative family, went to a pretty conservative school. And when I was growing up it was all about conforming, fitting in, and doing what was expected of me. I was never even able to think about issues like my gender identity or sexual orientation until I grew up. In my high school it was fit in." (Google employees, 2010)

These narratives illustrate that any sort of difference, be it race, gender, sexual identity, religion, etc., is reason enough for individual bullies to physically, emotionally, and verbally re-establish dominant social norms of rurality through violence deployed on nonconforming bodies.

Violence is further described as a consequence of ignorance of the small town; rural inhabitants are positioned as repressive necessarily because of their small-mindedness. Mark Tewksbury's description of his parents' reaction to his coming out configures their emotional immaturity as the logical byproduct of rural life. He says, "They took the news very, very badly. My mom and dad are both from a small town so they just didn't know how to process this stuff" (It Gets Better Canada, 2010). As small-town folk, Tewksbury describes his parents as obviously incapable of accepting his queer desire. Jena cites a similar discourse in her depiction of the harsh gender regulations in her rural upbringing. She says, "All throughout my elementary and junior high life, I

grew up in a small town that was very closed minded. If you were a girl you wore skirts or dresses, flip-flops, girlie clothes, but I didn't want to dress that way" (Jena, 2012). The violence Jena experienced was in part because people within her small town could not understand a female gender performance outside of the dominant feminine script they strictly reinforced. As seen in Mark and Jena's narratives, the violence of rurality is manifested through repression and erasure. These narratives illustrate the individual as a key figure of violence, especially in the predominant, literal form of the bully, but also present in the form of family members as indirectly imposed via denial, erasure, or rejection.

Institutional Violence

Danger is furthermore asserted as institutional—not just tolerated and sanctioned, but actively practiced. Homophobia is not exclusively articulated with aberrant or ignorant individual bodies in the *It Gets Better* narratives. It is not only LGBTQ individuals' peers who created unsafe school environments; the practices of administrators, teachers, and other adults charged with the responsibility of protecting youth consequently function to commit another kind of violence. Dan from Virginia says, "Gym class was a common source of torture, not only from my fellow students but even from many of the gym teachers. Most of the people who were tasked with helping and protecting me didn't do their job" (Dan, 2010). Institutional violence emerges in the form of neglect, characterized by administrators and teachers ignoring the abuse LGBTQ youth experience. Like Dan, Jason also experienced the violence of his peers compounded by neglectful administrators. Jason says, "As a questioning gay youth, I was teased and

harassed by my friends, by other kids on the playground, and all the while teachers and staff at school, they saw this and didn't do anything" (Jason, 2011). By not acknowledging the abuse, or taking any steps to protect queer youth, the administrators' silence condoned the violent actions of the bullies and, therefore, maintained the school as a site of danger for queer bodies.

Beyond neglect, institutions are described as particularly intolerant of queer sexuality. The theme of intolerance is parsed out throughout experiences within educational, medical, religious, and family institutions. In voicing the violence of her school, screen name UntitledSymphony says, "The administration, they don't really seem to care about you. In fact, they seem purposefully obtuse and like they're out to make your life miserable. Sometimes your administration is homophobic and is purposefully making things hard for you even though they're the people that are supposed to be there to help you" (UntitledSymphony, 2010). More than just blind ignorance, the narratives reveal administrative actions taken that effectively exclude and abuse queer youth. For example, Jason and his mother repeatedly approached his administrators to stop the abuse that his teachers were ignoring, and "each time, the school had an excuse as to why I was ultimately the person who was at fault because of [sic] my perceived or actual sexual orientation was instigating this abuse and this violence" (Jason, 2011). Miller retells a similar experience when his parents approached his school's administration; he says, "They basically said, 'If you look that way, talk that way, walk that way, act that way, then there's nothing we can do to help your son'"(Dan & Terry, 2010). Like Jason, Miller's non-normative gender performance is positioned as justifying the violence done to him. Foucault points out that the school not only educates children in foundational

subjects of knowledge, but also disciplines them into following societal rules and guidelines (Foucault, 1995). The *It Gets Better* narratives confirm and illustrate this dynamic as relevant to gender and sexuality

Across narratives, administrative actors in small town institutions enacted a practice of blaming the victim, the queer youth, for the homophobic violence committed on her or his body. As parlayed in these narrative, institutional discourses reflected and reinforced the more physical, literal violence enacted by individuals. Butler (1997) writes, "Oppressive language is not a substitute for the experience of violence. It enacts its own kind of violence" (p. 9). Injurious words have force because they carry with them a history of subjugation that has been used to *other* certain groups. Thus, the administrators' victim-blaming statements carry with them citational power (Butler, 1997, p. 50). The administrators' intolerant responses to homophobic bullying and gender nonconforming identities also make clear that institutions support practices that harm youth who do not perform normative gender and sexuality scripts.

The intolerance experienced by many of the videos' narrators as gay youth is related as much to the institution of religion that dominates the small town in the *It Gets Better* collective imaginary as to the educational institution. In fact, for many project participants, these two institutions, along with the institution of family, were conflated during childhood establishing the material parameters of the "small town" in which they either literally or figuratively existed. Savage says, "High school was bad. I was Catholic, went to Catholic high school, it was Catholic boys' school. My dad was a Catholic deacon, my mom was a Catholic lay minister, and my family was very Catholic" (Savage & Miller, 2010). Religion, school, and family were wholly/holy woven together through

familial responsibilities and affiliations. Immediately following the previous statement, Savage adds, "There were no gay people in my family and no openly gay people in my school" (Savage & Miller, 2010). The gay absence Savage denotes necessarily singled him out as a target for homophobia. The immense influence of religion on the institutions of family and education are experienced in a diversity of submissions. Emperor XXXIX Allan Spyere, The Imperial Court of San Diego, voices his feelings of confinement within the interwoven institutions. He says, "I was brought up in Brazil, went to a Catholic school and was brought up in a very conservative Catholic family, so I didn't really have a lot of places to run to" (Bears San Diego, 2011). Spyere's narrative rearticulates feeling stuck, or contained, within multiple interacting institutions that constrained his identity.

As a heteropatriarchal institution, Catholicism had little patience for Savage's love of musicals and "obviously gay" characteristics (Savage & Miller, 2010). Like many queer men who recounted their experiences within a host of conventional institutions, Savage was bullied for his deviance from hegemonic masculinity. The violence Savage describes was physical and verbal, and he ascribes his mother's initial rejection of his homosexuality to her religious affiliation. Implicit in these references to Catholicism is intolerance and erasure. Moreover, the betrayal Savage felt from his family's initial refusal to accept his sexuality reveals the home as an unsafe space for gay youth. A Google employee voices similar concerns, "I grew up at the dinner table hearing conversations about how gay people should die of AIDS, how gay people were less than straight people. And it really caused me to not feel very safe at home and at the same time, I didn't feel very safe at school either" (Google employees, 2010). The ways that

patriarchal institutions overlap and constrain queer youth's lives point to a reconfiguration of the home as a safe space. Wright (2010) writes, "Geographies of sexuality complicate the notion of home and challenge a priori notions of it as a domain of 'safety,' of a stable 'femininity,' and of a 'non-political domesticity'" (p. 59). As these narratives depict, the home—and especially the rural home—may be an unstable site of longing and rejection for queer youth.

Self-inflicted Violence

Insofar as these videos unmask the violence of institutions and bullies while upholding the symbolic power of the rural as antiqueer, they also reveal a major threat to queer youth of the small town: queer youth themselves. Indeed, the project emerges in response to a cultural cry for help—the "gay suicide epidemic." Several video narratives unabashedly retell childhoods wracked with self-hatred, depression, and suicide attempts. Notorious celebrity commentator Perez Hilton, in a rare moment of vulnerability, says, "I went through a point in my life where I was suicidal daily. I was thinking daily how I would kill myself. Today I'm going to slit my wrist; today I'm going to hang myself; today I'm going to jump off my building" (Hilton, 2010). Self-destructive thoughts such as, "If I'm not around no one would really miss me, no one would really care," and feeling "full of self-hatred" led to damaging emotional pain (Pixar employees, 2010). For some queer individuals, these violent thoughts turned into violent actions. One Apple employee recalls, "I found a bottle of sleeping pills in my parents medicine cabinet and I took them, all of them" (Apple employees, 2011). Commonly throughout the videos, the participants who divulged stories of self-inflicted pain emotionally rearticulate how

temporally framed those feelings and actions were in childhood. The stories of intense physical violence inflicted by the social actors themselves almost always end in a message about how much better life got after that moment.

Fracturing the dominant narrative of regretful, temporally framed, self-destructive behavior, transfeminist Kate Bornstein's story is a radical eruption that values debasement and controversially provokes queer individuals to commit violence to themselves. Bornstein embraces self-inflicted violence, criminality, and "freaky-deaky stuff" in her video in an attempt to make life more livable for queer youth. She offers her book, *Hello cruel world: 101 alternatives to suicide for teens, freaks, and other outlaws,* as a viable suggestion for making lives better. Bornstein says, "There's 101 things in there that are better than killing yourself. Some of them are illegal, immoral, unethical, self-destructive, but they're all in the book" (Bornstein, 2010). An application of Bornstein's (2006) indecent alternatives to suicide could help break the homogeneity of queer youth's lives, for example: "(2) Take deep breaths and touch yourself;" "(11) Tell a lie;" "(56) Get laid;" "(59) Eroticize the pain;" "(79) Take drugs. No, really. Take drugs;" "(81) Starve yourself;" or "(89) Shatter some family values" (pp. 100-105). Some of these alternatives can be seen as forms of self-discipline that are ways of participating in the violence of self-shattering. Bersani (1987) argues that the self that shatters "provides a basis on which sexuality is associated with power" (p. 218). Here, we also see resistance to the conventionally preferred desexualized child/minor as many of Bornstein's alternatives affirm sexual acts as ways of survival for youth. In this way, performing indecency and self-inflicted violence can be a fertile space for empowerment for queer teens. Notably, even though Bornstein's narrative evaluates violence

differently, it also serves to reinforce violence as part of the queer experience in a repressive environment, specifically in terms of a coping alternative. In this way, physical violence of self emerges as a way of prolonging life, a safety of self. Notably, these ways of self-shattering are not geographically bound, as self-inflicted violence may occur in any locale.

As with self-inflicted physical violence, self-policing functions within the narratives as both constraining and enabling. This form of violence reflects the erasure and repression noted as related to institutions, but here emerges in a self-inflicted variation. Where difference was reason enough for harassment in the space of the rural, many narrators give voice to the immense pressure to fit in. Chris in Jacksonville says, "I don't think [my high school friends] realized or even to this day know that I am gay and that locker room talk is probably what forced me to not come out until I was 23" (Chris, 2010). For Chris, being physically or verbally abused by homophobic bullies was not necessary to keep him performing compulsory heterosexuality. Because homophobia is so engrained in hegemonic masculinity, Chris knew that in order to maintain his position among high school guys, he had to perform heterosexual masculinity for the other men (Kimmel, 1996, p. 8). As one male-bodied queer participant recalls, "I acted tough and I put on a show" (Pixar employees, 2010). Perhaps repressing queer desire saved Chris from the physical, verbal, and emotional degradation that other narrators experienced in high school, but it also served to stagnate Chris' sexuality and sexual identity.

Repressing queer feelings goes beyond repressing sexual longings; for some of the narrators, self-policing extended to activities, social behaviors, and mannerisms. Brian Gallivan says, "I wasn't bullied, but it was because I tried so hard to fit in and I

regret that" (Gallivan, 2010). Gallivan describes avoiding activities he knew he would enjoy for fear that he would be found out as sexually different from the heterosexual majority. He says, "A lot of times in high school I wouldn't do the things—I didn't do acting, now I act and I write and I do improv and I love it. But I didn't do it in high school because I thought it would make me seem gay and I thought I would get picked on" (Gallivan, 2010). Stereotypes surrounding gay male sexuality kept Gallivan not just closeted about his sexual identity, but also discouraged him from pursuing activities associated with mediated discourses of gay male sexuality. According to Gallivan, the distance he created between himself and any behaviors associated with being gay was what ultimately protected him from homophobic bullying.

While self-imposed repression derailed the narrators from participating in activities they had desire for, it also served to temporarily protect them from the trauma of coming out, or being outed. As developed through the video narratives, the anticipation of the negative effects of coming out was tremendous; sometimes the fear of rejection was much greater than what the social actor came to experience. One participant says, "I felt like if I was a lesbian my father wouldn't love me anymore" (Pixar employees, 2010). For some video participants, this imagination was utterly wrapped in institutional messages. Chris says, "I grew up in a very conservative Baptist family. Dad was deacon; my mom sang in choir. We were very much a part of the church. I'm no longer a part of the church. I was petrified that I would lose my family because I was gay" (Chris, 2011). The anticipation of community rejection often inspired its own violence. An Apple employee says, "I had this kind of story in my mind that everyone was going to lash out at me and they were going to be mad, and they were going to say,

'Oh, you're going to hell,' and when I thought about that I became very depressed, and I had actually contemplated suicide" (Apple employees, 2011). Stories that reveal the force of the imagination in queer youth's conception of themselves and their sexual identities illuminate the power of social imaginaries on subject constitution. For some queer youth, imaginaries of violence served a greater bodily danger than material consequences of coming out.

Rurality materializes as a confining and constricting space, both in terms of geography and dominant social expectations, such that 'rurality' is a mobilizing trope rather than a demographic entity. Small towns, clearly defined and contained social enclaves,[5] and the institutions they bear, symbolize intolerance, repression, and erasure, ensuring their status in the gay imaginary as unsafe places for LGBTQ youth. Containment, or narrowness, thus defines geography within these spaces.

Urban Relief

Escape

In response to the multiple, interacting sites of danger rearticulated within the *It Gets Better Project*, the city surfaces as a counterpoint from the hostility, confinement, and small-mindedness of the rural. Safety is offered through references to the city, and the progressive, accepting "streets paved with rainbow pride" that it offers (Herring, 2010, p.15). Sister Amanda Rekinwith describes her decision to move to San Diego from a small Midwestern town where she was bullied for being different. She says, "I chose to

[5] For example, Savage was raised in an ethnic urban enclave. His experiences in the alienating and repressive parochial Catholic institutions complicate and layer a "small town mentality."

come to San Diego and just be who I was. And I'll never forget the day that I was riding the bus to class and I looked out and saw 'Gaymart' and finally realized that this might be the home of where my people were" (Bears San Diego, 2011). Rekinwith literally reifies the city as a gay Mecca, an imagine homeland where queer people of any race, sex, class, gender identity, ethnicity, nationality, or religion may feel at home. Interestingly, Rekinwith's rearticulation of the city as a gay homeland implicitly links safety with consumption through the symbol of "Gaymart." As Herring (2010) notes, metronormativity "facilitates the ongoing commodification, corporatization, and de-politization of U.S. based queer cultures in many locales" (p. 16). Rekinwith's narrative, along with others, helps support, sustain, and standardize idealizing geographies.

A number of other participants likewise center the city in their stories of how life got better for them. Following his portrayal of Anchorage as a place of "rednecks and snow," Eric credits Los Angeles as the place where authentic queer adults can make their lives (Eric, 2010). Eric says, "The good part is when you get the hell out of high school and you get to have your own life. And for me, I got a job, not just any job, I got a job in California and I moved to Los Angeles. And I met other people and I became a grown up and I got to date and meet cute guys" (Eric, 2010). Through his narrative, being a queer "grown up" could not have been possible within the constricting and dangerous site of the rural. Los Angeles, in contrast, is held up as the gay homeland where queer individuals can reach full adult stature, including work and romantic relationships. This sentiment is echoed in Janet Mock's narrative, who depicts her trajectory to New York as a pilgrimage to find her people. After describing the harassment she experienced in high school, Mock, a transsexual woman of color, says, "I've since moved from Hawaii to

New York where I can say that I've finally found my people. I have a boyfriend who I love, friends who love me just as I am, despite my past, despite everything" (Mock, 2011). In clear juxtaposition to the confinement of Hawaii, New York City is illustrated as the place where queer and trans individuals will be safe and loved. Notably, the centering of the city as a homeland where LGBTQ people must travel to in order to be safe, loved, authentic queer adults reifies a metronormative account of queer identity and subjectivity.

Working Difference

Within the general safety net that the city provides through the *It Gets Better Project*, two particular places emerge as sites where queer lives indisputably get better: college and the visible, glamorous workplace. First, in articulating higher education as a path to safety, community, and acceptance, the narratives illustrate the benefits of college in terms of the fact that it gets queer youth "out of that town;" that is, college, by mere fact of not being in the rural, is the way that life gets better (Fosterjc, 2011). At its most fundamental level, college provides freedom because it is away from the rural.

College as a place of traditional, general enlightenment is also held up as a particular place of enlightenment about LGBTQ lives, thereby positioned as a counterpoint to the ignorance of the rural. Moreover, college within the narratives takes on qualities of the city: a coalition of diverse, varied communities, including LGBTQ—suggesting that like rurality, urbanity is not limited to demographic or literal geographic variables but by qualities and characteristics of expansiveness and acceptance rather than containment and intolerance. Kevin, a 20-year-old college student, says, "I came to

college in a pretty big city, a pretty gay-friendly city, and almost all of those feelings of isolation just completely vanished… and I discovered the support system that there is for young gay people in college that there really isn't in high school" (Kevin, 2010). Unlike the homophobic practices of institutions in middle America, the practices of colleges in the big city are depicted as supportive. The feeling of connection Kevin voices is offered through a tie to community, other young gay people, and gay community is reified as a byproduct of city life. Screen name Fosterjc says, "I ended up going to a wonderful university with an accepting community and there were all these people that were like me. And people didn't care and it wasn't a big deal that I was gay" (Fosterjc, 2011). College provides a solution to feelings of gay absence in the rural. More than offering a group of queer friends, the increased amount of LGBTQ people in the space of college implies an anonymity absent in the rural, which functions to protect some queer bodies from being the obvious target for homophobia.

Colleges are conventionally understood as places of intellectual growth, advancement, expansion, and as part of this, creativity and difference are celebrated and cultivated. Places of higher education encourage uniqueness and difference, defining difference as creative rather than deviant. As a Google employee states, "When I went away to college, I was able to define who I was… I really felt like I could come alive and be expressive" (Google employees, 2010). Through the lure of college, queer youth are told their authentic, creative lives can begin. The qualities associated with college are mapped onto queer identity; the desire to feel creative and expressive as a queer subject is ameliorated in the narratives through the freedom and safety provided by college. Kade in California, says, "You are a deep, unique, creative soul" (Kade, 2010). Where difference

is depicted as a reason to be bullied in the confining space of the rural, the city, in part through its association with college, becomes the place where queer adults can be validated for their professed innate qualities of uniqueness and creativity. Thus, in contrast to a small-minded, conforming rurality, urbanity as symbolically and microcosmically mobilized in higher education is articulated figuratively with difference, variety, and expansiveness and constitutes the queer subject as creative, progressive, and unique.

Another avenue via which safety for the queer subject is realized is work, or the professional context. This context articulates safety with comfort and contentment, in particular, financial success, creativity and expression, power over others, and association with a status symbol. Financial success provides security and stability, and endows LGBTQ individuals with access to homonormative neoliberal ideals and status. As one Ernst & Young employee says, "I wanted this car, like in 2005, the Mercedez Benz SLK 280 came out, completely different model. And I was like, 'Wow! That's a really nice car!' One day, I got it, and I got it because of my job. My job is cool because I can get some of the things that I want as an adult" (Ernst & Young, 2011). The employee's career at a global firm cultivated her self-actualization. An employee at PricewaterhouseCoopers says, "Doing well in school and not letting other things distract from my focus helped me get a great career. And now I'll have the opportunity to transfer internationally for my career and get even more life experiences out there" (PwC, 2011). In these narratives, professional and work success is linked to self-actualization.

As seen through the project's narratives, safety is an individual achievement, one that queer adults may earn through their inherent uniqueness and difference, echoing the

valorization of these qualities encountered in college and university settings. In contrast to difference as dangerous in the rural, difference is rearticulated as a strategy for economic success and, by extension, security in the urban. For example, Darla, a producer at Pixar, says:

> Pixar is made up of just a crazy combination of people—there's mad scientists and dancers and animators and just all kinds of unique individuals---and most of those unique individuals weren't the most popular in high school and junior high. They just weren't; it's just the way it worked. Thank goodness we hung around and found each other and created this familial tribe of people that's created this unprecedented team that makes movie magic. (Pixar employees, 2010)

Here, Darla asserts difference as a source of (movie) magic; uniqueness and creativity are special qualities that make queer employees valued at the global corporation. An Apple employee vocalizes his perspective on difference as a queer adult strength. He says, "No way would I not want to be who I am because my uniqueness is my strength. It's what differentiates me from other people" (Apple employees, 2011). While difference made the employee a target for assault in childhood, it provides him a form of safety through corporate success in adulthood. Global and city-based businesses depict themselves as models of progressiveness, creativity, and difference, and this is starkly contrasted to the lack of value these qualities carry in the rural. One Google employee says:

> You're sitting in your house. It's a small town. You feel this magnetism like you're never going to get out. You're never going to go anywhere. And it really draws you in and you feel like there's no hope, like there's no one who'll ever understand you. I'm a software engineer now at Google and I just want to tell you straight-forward that it gets so much better. (Google employees, 2010)

The Google Corporation stands in opposition to the confinement of rurality. The software engineer was able to reconfigure his geeky strangeness into something unique, something that could, as depicted, only be valued by a city-based institution. Through the city, difference is reframed from deviance to creativity.

Salvation is thus articulated in the narratives as attained via professional identity and success. Through financial success and freedom, individual LGBTQ adults can gain the comfort they lacked as bullied youth. This is exemplified by a partner at Ernst & Young when he says, "As time has gone by, I feel as if [being gay is] a nonissue for me personally. As a partner here, I feel very comfortable. I'm responsible for a practice out of New York, and I manage a lot of people, and I have a lot of clients on Wall Street, and I feel very comfortable talking about my life" (Ernst & Young, 2011). Power, and specifically power over others, is also implicated in the individual's narrative, as the comfort he achieves as a partner in a firm is likely contingent on his status. Financial and professional success is the route through which LGBTQ adults may find comfort and contentment, and this is organized around the victorious individual.

Further, economic success and power are used as bait within the business narratives for queer youth to continue living. One way that this version of the American dream is held up is through the idea of competition by overpowering "the bully" figure of childhood with adult status and success. Identifying as "weird, Black, and a lesbian," screen name HauntedNursery retells her story of being traumatically bullied in a small town in Texas, later going away to college, buying a home, and going to the grocery story to find one of her tormenters from middle school and high school working as a cashier. She says, "I might get karmically kicked in the face for taking such joy in the fact that she isn't very successful, but hey, I went through a lot" (HauntedNursery, 2010). The space of the professional world allows queer youth to imagine transcending their high school bullies by seeking alliances with corporations and business organizations. Similar sentiments are illustrated in an Apple employee's narrative; he says, "The bullies seem

like the powerful people and the successful people and the secret of the real world is they're at the peak of their power at 15 and 16 and there will come a time when the bullies are not successful and the people they bullied are" (Apple, 2011). As depicted by these narratives, being different ultimately serves queer individuals in the business world by giving them power over others.

Obtaining distance from the small town, or overcoming the confinement of the rural, is both literally and figuratively the necessary act for life to get better for queer youth. Moreover, the association between professional success and safety aligns institutions that are predicated on power and success—ranging from higher education as a precursor to businesses and corporations as the end goal—as valid, safe, and redemptive. This can be seen through the videos of Google, Apple, Pixar, Ernst & Young, and others. This vision of queer adulthood as marked by alliances with powerful market-driven institutions leads to a conflation of self with work, and more specifically, power and profit.

Conclusion

Tracing the rhetoric of safety as it is tied to place throughout the videos of the *It Gets Better Project* reveals a specific definition of queer identity. These narratives tie the physical and social characteristics of the city with the social characteristics of queer individuals in any and all locations. Specifically, the city, articulated in and through institutions of higher education and major businesses and corporations, is centered as an enlightened place of creativity and uniqueness, and these qualities are explicitly rearticulated as innate to queer identity. Rurality becomes the foil for urbanity; small

towns take on the qualities of homophobic bigots, including hostility, danger, and conformity. As such, rural spaces are geographically, socially, and morally depicted as small, narrow, and confining.

The powerful institutions of school, religion, and family are conventionally understood as bastions of civility. As seen through the *It Gets Better* video narratives, institutions across middle America attempt to discipline gay youth into heteronormative gender performances that society deems essential. The social actors assert that within this "small town mentality," institutions, and the agents who perform them, are unsafe places for the bodies of LGBTQ youth, as dramatic and consistent violence is perpetuated against them within spaces that are culturally deemed safe. Consequently, within the gay imaginary, cultural presumptions of rurality rearticulate traditional values by consistently associating the small town with homophobia. Thus, working through the gay imaginary, the narratives of the *It Gets Better Project* reify cultural presumptions about ruralized spaces as unsafe sites for LGBTQ bodies. Rurality becomes defined figuratively, ranging from truly rural to small towns to even enclaves of large cities: it stands in for provincialism, intolerance, containment, and small mindedness.

Subsequently, the institutions associated with the imagined, metaphorical urbanity are conflated with individualism, and more specifically, individual self-actualization and fulfillment. Higher education and glamorous workplaces are not resources for self-improvement so much as they are avenues through which queer adults can transcend and indirectly triumph over their high school bullies through status, financial gain, and success. Professional success provides comfort, but, more importantly, it offers LGBTQ adults the control they lacked in their childhoods through alliances with visionary and

powerful market-driven institutions. While this association serves to legitimize queer lives through acceptance in powerful neoliberal institutions, it also serves to depoliticize and corporatize queer culture.

Institutional structures that reify homophobia and transphobia are not held accountable, and the impetus is placed on LGBTQ adults to "lift themselves up by their bootstraps" through economic gains. In this way, the individual is valorized in ways that align with neoliberal logics: salvation through work and, implicitly, redemption through consumption. The *It Gets Better Project* valorizes individual agency through narratives that offer college and professional success as resources for LGBTQ youth to imagine their lives getting better in a metropolis. There are several implications of the economically driven safety net crafted through the project. First, valorizing the individual aligns the project with fundamental neoliberal imperatives that render the individual as ultimately responsible for her or his welfare and further promote the market as a site of self-actualization. The institutional structures that uphold homophobia and transphobia are not held accountable or responsible for creating and contributing to a culture of bullying; the responsibility is left on the individual to get out and find a better life. If the impetus is on queer individuals to simply make their own lives better, instead of on deconstructing powerful systems that privilege heterosexuality, then individuals who do not/cannot make their lives better within discriminatory institutions are by extension to blame for that failure. Furthermore, the cultural and economic capital implicitly required to self-actualize in these narratives—as relevant to mobility, class, and status--are taken for granted: access to college and to the elite workplaces cited is assumed. Finally, the

emphasis on individuality, as opposed to community, further contributes to the depolitization and corporatization of urban-based queer cultures.

CHAPTER 3

INNOCENT BULLIES AND ASEXUAL QUEERS

Mythologies of geography, and in particular around rurality and urbanity, are configured in interesting and revealing ways for queer identity through the *It Gets Better Project*. The project demonstrates the power of the imagination as it takes a part in the efforts of LGBTQ youth to construct their own lives and identities through a rhetorical relationship to place. In addition to safety, discussed in the last chapter, another key axis on which the rhetoric of place is configured in the *It Gets Better Project* is innocence. In particular, culturally received notions of childhood innocence are troubled, disrupted, and ultimately inverted in ways that are rhetorically articulated with place. Notably, these (re)configurations culminate in an asexual queer subject.

Fracturing Childhood Innocence

The *It Gets Better Project* takes up the question of innocence on the figure of the queer child. As Stockton (2009) notes, the gay child experiences a "backward birth" where in order for a gay child to be born, the straight self needs to die (pp. 6-7). This coming out process, which often happens after childhood, complicates notions of queer childhood both for the narrator and the audience. As queer adults recall themselves as

children, fantasies of their memories may instead get produced (Stockton, 2009, pp. 5-6). Thus, the narrators may never be fully sure where fantasy extends into memory, as fantasy is entangled in and around memories. Similar dynamics are in play in the *It Gets Better Project* around childhood and innocence, manifest in this case around the deconstruction of both as well as their temporal inversion.

The videos in the project both deconstruct dominant discourses of childhood innocence and reify certain normative assumptions. The received social imaginary holds children as pristine, innocent, and desexualized, and White, middle-class children, in particular, are highly policed under these rules (Stockton, 2009, p. 30). Moreover, this culturally prevalent discourse of innocent childhood characterizes children themselves as pure, good, and kind. Scholars have noted that this narrow configuration of childhood is a cultural myth (Giroux, 2001, p. 5; Stockton, 2009, p. 31), and the *It Gets Better Project* further unravels this cultural assumption. Screen name HauntedNursery recounts childhood trauma caused by peers. She says, "Anything that you can think of that a kid would go through in school as far as being picked on, I've gone through it: the fights, the taunting, the pushing, random people tripping you. I've been spat on before" (HauntedNursury, 2010). Similarly, screen name Fosterjc retells, "I got into fights. I had stuff stolen, stuff vandalized. I graduated with nine death threats (Fosterjc, 2011). Narrators rearticulate the qualities of children by aligning them with perversion and degradation. Darren Hayyes exemplifies this in his video submission:

> By the age of 13 in high school, I was bullied so much so that I didn't even want to go to school anymore. It seemed that everyone else in the world knew that I was gay before I did. There was something about me that some of the kids didn't like, and boy did they let me know about it. I was picked on. I was tormented. I was called names. I was beaten up because I was gay. (Hayyes, 2010)

The physical violence and malice the narrators describe give the lie to the imaginary of children as virtuous and kind.

Notably, Hayye's narrative also establishes the importance of sexual identity to youth insofar as they spend enormous energy thinking about, and vigorously policing, their peers' sexuality. As Hayyes illustrates, other children produce the present discourse around gay childhood in and through the pervasive presence of heterosexuality, which defines and dictates relationships between children. This reveals another key feature of the queering of the prevailing myth of childhood in the collective narrative: the sexualizing of children. While most narrators reference their pubescent or adolescent years, which are in fact more complicated sexually even in a cultural imaginary that acknowledges teens' "raging hormones," powerful and official pressures to asexuality persist even for these individuals. These pressures are demonstrated by laws around the age of sexual consent, proliferating abstinence programs, and parental permission necessary in many states to access abortions and certain forms of birth control (Jensen, 2010). Cultural anxieties surrounding youth sexuality are further exemplified through the treatment of queer teenagers, whose attempts to come out may be trivialized as a product of teenage confusion, or inauthentic, by heteronormative adults (Sauerman, 2009). Thus, while biologically and hormonally teenagers are acknowledged as existing in an immensely different space than children, cultural prescriptions continue to preserve asexuality for them, as well.

Certainly, there is immense discomfort surrounding acknowledging childhood sexuality, and the *It Gets Better Project* both adheres to and violates these rules. This is accomplished in two predominant ways; first, the narrators interrupt the conventional

configuration of children by exposing innate contradictions in myths around childhood. Additionally, by describing sexual identity as a primary way in which children identify and understand themselves and others, the narrators reinscribe childhood in terms of sexual identity. After Shaun describes her first crush on a girl at the age of 12, she says, "And coming from a closeted family where I had never been accepted for my sexuality and coming from a school where we don't even talk about heterosexual sex let alone homosexual sex, I realized right then this is who I am, this is the acceptance I need" (Shaun, 2010). Shaun voices cultural prescriptions for children to be asexual and abstinent. By recalling a queer childhood, performers in the project give voice to children's sexualities. Although sexual activity on the part of children is not addressed, children's sexual orientations are addressed within the narratives. When Oliver says, "It was probably about the age of 12… that I hit puberty and started sort of realizing that I was attracted to guys," he offers a retrospective that structures a gay child with clear sexual attraction (Oliver, 2010). Interestingly, although narrators reinscribe childhood with *sexual identity*, they halt short of speaking to *sexuality*.

One of the ways in which sexual identity is reinvested in childhood across *It Gets Better* narratives is via a "born this way" rhetoric. The "born this way" perspective, although not present in all narratives, essentializes a congenital queer child. For example: "I knew from my earliest memory that I was gay" (Apple employees, 2011); "I knew at a young age that I was very different;" "I brought my sister's doll to show and tell" (Pixar employees, 2010); and experiencing queer attractions in "3rd grade," "5th grade," and "6th grade," (It Gets Better Canada, 2010). "Born this way" arguments are further underscored by video narratives that cite Lady Gaga's hit track of the same name. Celebrity blogger

Perez Hilton say, "You should be proud of who you are. It's not a choice to be who you are because you were made this way. As Lady Gaga says, 'You were born this way'" (Hilton, 2010). By aligning queerness with an essential biological formation, Hilton asserts that LGBTQ youth should be proud because they cannot help who they are. Jamey Rodemeyer, a 14-year-old boy from Buffalo, echoes his role model's sentiments. He says, "[Lady Gaga] lets me know that I was born this way. And that's my advice to you from her is you were born this way and all you have to do is hold your head up and you'll go far. Just love yourself and you're set"[6] (Rodemeyer, 2011). This rhetoric, although sporadically featured across narratives, is another tactic by which children are inscribed with sexual identity in the *It Gets Better Project*. Notably, this rhetoric, too, stops short of sexualizing the queer subject. Further, the biological argument is quite controversial, including among many in the LGBTQ community, but it is a primary way in which sexual identity is written on children in these narratives.

The collective narrative in the *It Gets Better Project* reveals childhoods enmeshed in queer identifications, deconstructing dominant assumptions of children as simultaneously (and paradoxically) asexual and heterosexual. While giving voice to adolescent sexual identity, the narratives stop short of speaking to sexuality, retaining asexuality for queer youth. In these ways, the narratives both interrupt cultural configurations of childhood and reinforce them.

[6] In light of Rodemeyer's suicide 5 months after posting this video, his statements are tragically ironic

Inverting the Invert

Another way in which the prevalent mythology of childhood is troubled is by inverting it temporally: that is, childhood is resituated as time of necessary (for survival) toughness and cynicism, and adulthood conversely is advanced as a time of wonder and magic. Savage says, "If there are 14, and 15, and 16-year-olds, 13-year-olds, 12-year-olds watching this video, what I'd love you to take away from it really is that it gets better… Your life can be amazing but you have to tough this period out…" (Dan & Terry, 2010). The narrator asserts that innocence has no place for the queer child; queer youth's survival necessarily entails operating within toughness and cynicism. Thus, several of the video narrators advise, "Hang in there," (Clinton, 2010); "Shrug it off," (Jena, 2012); and "Keep going" (Fosterjc, 2011). An Apple employee depicts toughness as a response not only to bullying, but also to the alienation and loneliness that she ascribes to queer childhood. She says, "In our lives, we're going to have friends, we're going to have family, but they're not always there. And in that toughest, darkest moment, if we can rely on ourselves, that's more than we will ever need to face the world" (Apple employees, 2011). In this sense, the *It Gets Better* videos engender a queering of childhood by realigning it with toughness and cynicism as opposed to innocence.

As the narrators describe, what has to be "toughed out" is childhood, the temporal site of queer youth trauma, which is conflated with the small town. The advice is to overcome this obstacle, childhood itself, in order for life to get better. This entails leaving childhood behind temporally, much as leaving one's "small town," however defined, is necessary for self-actualization. This notion is consistently reiterated as the temporality of childhood coupled with the locale of high school emerges as a phantasmatic problem.

Eric says, "[High school] is a shitty pit stop on the way to being a grown up, and as soon as it's done, everything gets so much better" (Eric, 2010). Childhood and high school are associated with pain and degradation, implying that adulthood is a place free from bullying and hatred. Savage says, "The worst time of your life really for many gay kids is high school and if at that time of your life you chose to end your life, you know, the bullies really won…" (Dan & Terry, 2010). Savage urges queer adolescents to continue living through the "worst" time of their lives, problematizing childhood as a dangerous time and place.

The brutal terrain of childhood and the toughness required to navigate it is underscored by a rhetoric of competition. Several narratives describe survival for queer youth in terms of a fight between them and their bullies. As seen in Savage's video where he ascribes gay suicide to allowing bullies to "win," competition is used throughout the narratives to inspire queer youth to continue their lives/battle. Shaun says, "And getting rid of high school and realizing that killing yourself because you're miserable lets them win" (Shaun, 2010). Survival is framed as the way to beat the bullies by not giving in to their devaluation of queer lives. Within this rhetorical battle, future success and economic power over bullies is used as bait for queer youth to continue living. HauntedNursery says:

> No matter where you end up in life, you are guaranteed to end up better than [the bullies] because they are putting all of their energy into making you unhappy instead of putting their energy into studying or planning whatever they're going to do with the rest of their lives. As uncomfortable as you are right now, it's worth it to deal with that discomfort just to be able to laugh in those people's faces later on down the line. (HauntedNursery, 2010)

Toughness and determination are advocated for queer youth to ensure their survival and ability to eventually "laugh in those people's faces." Queer youth are advised to both tough out and triumph over their bullies and their childhoods.

Childhood becomes an embattled site through the collective narrative, one that is conflated with place. Hilton says, "If you're in a really uncomfortable situation, in a year, in 2 years, in 3 years, in a few years, you'll be out of there" (Hilton, 2010). The "there" is consistently rearticulated in the narratives as the dangerous space of the rural, both literally and figuratively defined. Nick in Chicago notes, "Growing up in a small town as the somewhat obviously gay boy is not necessarily the easiest thing in the world. Once I moved on and moved to the next phase of my life, life got a whole lot more pleasant" (Nick, 2010). Here, both Nick's locale and age are seen as sources for Nick's trauma. The narrator had to overcome these obstacles, the small town and his youth, in order for life to get better. Sharing Nick's perspective, Hilton says, "Most everything in life will get better because you'll be older" (Hilton, 2010).

Notably, while the conventions of mythological childhood are disrupted in these narratives, the concept itself is retained, in all its romance, but it is instead relocated in queer adulthood. Childhood is both positioned as something to continue living for and to live through. In this sense, the queer adult metanarrative engages with the "future anterior," or the will have been. The adult asks the queer child of the present tense to jet themselves into the future tense and then from their futurity to look back upon their childhood and imagine it getting better. As Stockton notes, queer children may not "grow up" like other children, in the sense of a "vertical movement upward towards full stature, marriage, work, reproduction," but may "grow sideways," creating alternative structures

(Stockton, 2009, p. 4). Therefore, the materiality of queer lives complicates these normative trajectories. Additionally, in advising queer youth to wait out childhood, LGBTQ youth are not given resources to empower themselves in their present.

Indeed, while the conventional myth of childhood innocence is demystified, the concept is retained and simply inverted such that it marks self-actualized queer adulthood. In opposition to the depravity of childhood and the small town, which are depicted as the sites from which queer youth are expected to escape, urbanity and adulthood are positioned as both symbiotic and magnificent. The conflation of temporality and external locale function to assert that adulthood and the world out there are places of wonder, love, and innocence for LGBTQ individuals. Chris Colfer, who plays Kurt on Fox's *Glee*, says, "I promise you there is a world full of acceptance and love just waiting for you to find it" (Colfer, 2010). Vera Lent, a San Diego drag queen, echoes, "It's a wonderful big gay world, embracing and loving and wonderful" (Bears San Diego, 2011). California deejay Kade says, "You will meet people who will love and accept you for being who you are. You will find love, you really will. You will find that the world is a great, big wonderful place full of wonderful people" (Kade, 2010). Video after video rearticulate a "big gay world" that queer youth will undoubtedly find, one that accepts everyone and is characterized by cosmopolitanism and sophistication, as well as an absence of social, cultural, and political injustice. The videos create an adultscape that is free from homophobia and intolerance. In this way, the narratives rearticulate adulthood as the place of innocence, wonder, and naïveté. The promise of this beatific, innocent future offers queer youth deliverance in adulthood for surviving the corruptness and depravity of childhood. As the degradation of childhood is consistently rearticulated

with the horrors of rurality, this deliverance is both explicitly and implicitly promised through the lure of the great gay city.

Collectively, the narratives trade the myth of childhood innocence, which they expose as nasty, brutish, and a time for cynicism, for a future adult innocence, one crafted in and through privilege, and both places of temporality maintain asexuality. This inversion of innocence offers deliverance and rebirth, as queer youth are promised the innocence in adulthood that they were denied in their youth. Thus, the adultscape is painted as a heavenly place full of love and acceptance, and LGBTQ individuals must leave their small towns in order to realize this "great gay world."

Asexual Inclinations

Just as the troubling of the conventional mythology of childhood entails inscribing queer youth with sexual identity but not sexuality, the queer adulthood painted by the narratives similarly remains decoupled from sexuality, distinct from sexual identity. Mark Robert says, "If where you're from is intolerant to your sexuality, you're going to reach an age where you're going to have the ability to escape that reality and it is so much better" (It Gets Better Canada, 2010). Robert asserts that adulthood and mobility will provide LGBTQ youth tolerance, but avoids addressing sexuality. Similarly, screen name UntitledSymphony says, "Once you're out of high school, you can find an environment that will support you, an environment where you can be happy, where you can find people that will be there for you, and accept you, and love you for who you are" (UntitledSymphony, 2010). Narratives depict a queer adulthood that is vaguely and romantically marked by supportive friends, family, and community—sometimes partners,

but those partners, too, are characterized exclusively in terms of their validating roles. In effect, the loving family and community that "should" be there in childhood—in all its innocence and asexuality—is resituated in adulthood. Unmentioned in these narratives is a realization and embracing of one's sexuality, as marked by sexual fulfillment, pleasure, exploration.

When partners are referenced within the narratives, they are aligned with the recreation of idyllic childhood as conventionally construed: for instance, children, a home, and lavish family vacations. In this way, conventions—arguably, fundamentally homonormative conventions (Duggan, 2003)--are maintained, simply transposed. For example, Savage and Miller discuss taking their adopted son on family snowboarding trips and walks through Paris (Savage & Miller, 2010). The family image they create easily mirrors ideals of White, heterosexual, middle-class families, in effect reifying the "normalcy" of "same-sex" families. Miller says, "Strolling through the streets of Paris, hitting double black diamonds… those moments make it so worth sticking out the bullying, and the pain, and the despair of high school. And if you just do that, you have moments like that and so many more ahead of you" (Dan & Terry, 2010). Miller quite literally guarantees queer youth these luxurious and sentimental experiences as validation of their superiority over their childhood bullies. The "American Dream" mythology that is so intricately intertwined with the cultural imaginary of family is similarly bolstered. Screenname Fosterjc sums this up when he says, "Now I have an education, a job, a boyfriend, a family that finally came around" (Fosterjc, 2011). Eric in Chicago says:

> I couldn't imagine when I was 16 years old that I would own a condo with a view of lake Michigan at this stage in my life, or that I'd have friends, especially gay friends, that I've known for 20 years or more who've been there for me through thick and thin, and good and bad. And I've even had the opportunity to travel the

> world with them. (Eric, 2011)

Not only did Eric find love and acceptance in the metropolis, he also gained social capital and economic privileges exemplified through buying a prime location in the city and traveling the world. Thus, instead of making an argument for sexual freedom, narratives avoid the topic in favor of messages of love and acquisition of capital, both economic and social.

Asexuality is also secured through a trope of martyrdom and deliverance that emerges across these narratives, which is also connected to place. The suffering and sacrifices of childhood endow queer children with martyrdom, from which they are delivered in adulthood. These familiar motifs of sanctification further distance queer youth from sexuality. Don Riggs, a member of the Bears of San Diego, offers a more explicit link between martyrdom and reward for sacrifice to place. Riggs says:

> Back in high school, I felt completely alone. I didn't think that anybody would ever care about me or that I mattered at all. I couldn't imagine that anyone would ever love me for who I am. Growing older, I found out it does get so much better; I couldn't have been so wrong. I found a wonderful community that has accepted me. I found so much love and acceptance than I ever imagined I could. I found a man that I love that I've been together with for 10 years now. Just hang in there cause it does get so much better. (Bear of San Diego, 2011)

Riggs had to leave high school, the place that made him feel isolated, lonely, and devalued, and find a community that offered him the rewards of love and acceptance. The message is that if queer youth "just hang in there" through the alienation of their present place and time, then they will be delivered the privileges Riggs describes in the new place of their adulthood. Notably, this imagined adulthood preserves the magic and wonder of childhood, as well as its asexuality. The religious dimensions of the martyrdom trope further obviate sexuality even as the narratives accommodate sexual identity, rendering it

abstract and decoupling it from the worldly, the mundane, and the body. In this way, the Christian ideal of "love the sinner, hate the sin" is ironically sustained to assert loving the queer, but not the queer act.

Another trope that accomplishes queer identity devoid of sexuality is that of citizenship, most prominently parlayed—perhaps not surprisingly—in the videos of politicians who have contributed to the project. These videos invoke a patriotic history to guarantee a futurity for queer youth that will provide them the status and rights in adulthood they were not given in childhood. George Smitherman, the first openly gay member of the Ontario Legislature, says, "There are so many people who have persevered and dealt with the struggles and who have been liberated from the kind of bullying and the kind of circumstances that you might be facing today" (It Gets Better Canada, 2010). Citing pioneer gay political activists, Smitherman infuses queerness with political principle and simultaneously silences queer practice. Additionally, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton draws upon a nostalgic patriotism to assert a narrative of American progress. She says, "The story of America is the story of people coming together to tear down barriers, stand up for rights, and insist on equality not only for themselves, but for all people. And in the process, they create a community of support and solidarity that endures" (Clinton, 2010). Clinton then gives examples of officials serving in the United States government openly, concluding with, "It wasn't long ago that these men and women would not have been able to serve openly, but today they can" (Clinton, 2010). Narratives of progression for queer adults project ideals of rebirth of both the individual and the nation, and this imaginary works explicitly on place through the rhetoric of nation. By positioning queer adulthood in relation to lofty ideals of nation and

citizenship, the materialities and embodiments of queerness—including sexuality—are elided.

While queer identity is valorized and validated in this collective narrative of queer adulthood, various rhetorical moves cordon sexuality off from sexual identity. In this way, the narratives make queerness about principle and purity of heart and mind—in other words, render it innocent. Only through queer identity within the context of an urban, cosmopolitan space can queer individuals realize the magical attributes of queer identity.

Conclusion

Insofar as the *It Gets Better Project* rearticulates the symbolic power of the metropolis in the gay narrative, the narratives also problematize the received cultural imaginary of childhood as a perilous place of time. The dangerous temporality of childhood is furthermore tied to the concept of rurality, although this designation, again, is at times more figurative rather than literal, and may also refer to provincialism and social enclaves as readily as actual small towns. While childhood is queered as a time of cynicism, savvy, and toughness, the future promises innocence in the forms of wonder, magic, and discovery—specifically as associated with the metropolitan or national ideal. Here, love, wonder, and magic are articulated with queer adulthood, where once LGBTQ youth leave their current place, both in terms of temporality and physical location, they will be reborn with the innocence they were not granted in their youth. Not only do queer adults find love and acceptance in the metropolis, they also gain social capital and economic privileges as described by the video narratives. The *It Gets Better Project*

temporally inverts innocence for queer youth by realigning it with adulthood as opposed to conventional assumptions about childhood.

Notably, while this inversion fractures certain myths surrounding childhood, the narratives serve to preserve cultural anxieties about deviant sexuality, for both queer adolescents and adults, by silencing sexuality. Queer youth are given resources for imagining the hell of their childhood to be redeemed through the heaven of sexual identity in the city, sans sexuality. Although the recalling of childhood sexual identity disorients the child from socially presumed heterosexuality, the narratives maintain asexuality for queer bodies. Queer activists have argued that the marginalization of LGBT individuals is based in other's discomfort around queer sexuality, and these activists have denounced ignoring sexuality in favor of the more palatable message of love. Patton writes, "Queer struggle is rooted in exploding the strictures on sexual freedom in America," (Patton, 2008, p. 2) and the *It Gets Better Project* does not engage in this struggle.

Another aspect that is erased in this (re)imaginary of innocence is race and class privilege: not only in terms of means and mobility, as pointed out in the prior chapter, but also because the conditions for innocence, magic, wonder and social validation described by these overwhelmingly White narrators are rarely a simple matter of changing scenery for people of color for whom racism, if variously deployed, remains profound and pervasive irrespective of place. For example, Stockton (2006) notes that the cultural investment in protecting children's innocence is set on w\White, middle-class children's bodies, while "the Black boy, quite simply, is not weak enough to come across as innocent" (p. 31). Similarly, for queer adults of color, narratives of life instantly getting

better once the individual crosses an imaginary age threshold and relocates to the city ignores the dominance of White supremacy. Gabrielle Rivera, a lesbian Latina poet from the Bronx, both participated within the *It Gets Better Project* and contradicted the dominant narrative.[7] Rivera says:

> As a gay woman of color I just want to let the youth know that it kind of doesn't get better. All these straight rich celebrities, I'm not even gonna name them, they can tell you that it gets better because they've got money and people don't care and whatever. They're coming from a good place and stuff and I appreciate that but I'm gonna be real because I live this life and I'm not rich and I'm brown and I probably look like most of you. First of all, it doesn't get better, but what happens is that you get stronger. (Rivera, 2010)

Instead of providing a promise of instantaneous homophobic relief after high school or in a big city, Rivera places value on living through the experience. Her narrative imposes on temporal innocence by countering the unacknowledged racial and class privileging the project's collective narrative produces. Furthermore, simple lines in the narratives such as "just hold your head up" and "love yourself" imply that homophobia may be overcome through individual actions. Conversely, if individuals cannot overcome homophobia, it is their fault for not loving themselves enough, as opposed to acknowledging and recognizing the multiple systems that perpetually disadvantage queer youth as differently raced, classed, and gendered bodies.

[7] In an interview with NPR, Savage identifies Rivera's video as one of his favorites within the project. Interestingly, and problematically, although he notes that her video contradicts the message of the project, he interprets her narrative as "the Latina, lesbian, Bronx way of saying 'it gets better'" (Gross, 2011).

CHAPTER 4

IT GETS MORE REAL: AUTHENTIC QUEERNESS IN URBANITY

The third axis on which the *It Gets Better Project* navigates place is authenticity. Authenticity is a contentious and contested term within communication scholarship and beyond. Scholars have noted the "constraining and potentially self-destructive" effects of theorizing authenticity within identity politics (Jackson, 2005, p. 12). Namely, the production of "collective identities," as the *It Gets Better Project* performs, provides "what we might call scripts: narratives that people use in shaping their life plans and in telling their stories," (Appiah, 1996, p. 97). These cultural scripts may have the effect of making social difference seem innate and fixed. With this in mind, my purpose in this chapter is not to theorize authenticity or even assert that there is such a thing, but to explore how the concept is rhetorically crafted in relation to place. Queer identity is reframed as a city-based innovation, one that constitutes the queer subject as a mobile, creative agent. Within the narratives, conventional articulations of authenticity with rurality and tradition are disrupted, and authenticity is rearticulated with urbanity and innovation.

Traditional Home

Authenticity, whether apprehended as real or imagined, is strongly articulated with simplicity and "honesty," which is specifically connected in the national cultural imaginary with rurality and the small town. Conventional assumptions about the small town find images of the simple life: bucolic rolling hills, quiet pastoral evenings, and stable, fixed communities and histories. The perceived social imaginary of rurality is perhaps exemplified best through Andy Griffith's iconic role as sheriff of the sleepy, slow-paced rural community of Mayberry, North Carolina (Leonard, 1960). Ellen Degeneres jokes of the slow-paced Mayberry community, "Nothing ever happened on that show. When there's time for whistling, there's a lot of time on a show" (Ryan & Gallen, 2003). These associations further, inevitably, articulate tradition and stability with authenticity. Tradition is located in established institutions, such as the family, religion, and the military, and these sites hold the "small town values" that conservatives such as Republican presidential candidate Rick Santorum articulate with antigay sentiments (King & O'Conner, 2012, p. 1). Within the gay imaginary, however, discourses of the small town hold it as a symbolic site of violence and degradation (Herring, 2010, p. 5). As noted in Chapter 2, the *It Gets Better Project* upholds the gay imaginary's configuration of small towns and the institutions they bear as symbols of intolerance, repression, and erasure, reifying the discursive metronormative construction of small towns as unsafe for LGBTQ youth. Accordingly, hallmark features of authenticity as articulated with the "small town"—namely, stability and honesty—are troubled if not overtly challenged in these narratives.

Dominant cultural notions of the small town as a site of stability are rearticulated as confining, and moreover, unstable, precarious, and dangerous within the narratives of the *It Gets Better Project* and the broader gay imaginary. Several narratives assert the small town as an unwelcoming and hostile place for queer individuals through rurality's rhetorical association with established institutions of family and religion, which are furthermore understood as essential, authentic dimensions of the small town. Laura in Pennsylvania connects her southern Baptist upbringing to fundamental dimensions of growing up "in a very rural area of Mississippi." She says, "When I was about 15 is when I grasped what homosexuality was. I was actually in church. I was hearing a sermon on Leviticus. I made a connection that, one, I'm a homosexual and, two, that I'm going to go to hell because of that" (Laura, 2011). Laura's narrative reconfigures tradition, in this case traditional sexual arrangements, as repressive. Like religion, the conventional, traditional family unit is understood as fundamental to the small town, and ostensibly authentic (Howard, 1999, p. 14). The narratives describe the oppressive power of these traditional institutions through the following lines: "I grew up in a very Christian, fundamentalist Christian, family. So it was really uncomfortable for a while, to say the least. I really did experience bullying" (BAVC 2011); "After being outed, I went through a very, very, very rough time with my family. My family is Baptist"; "One of the things we sometimes forget is that parents can also be bullies, and when that is the case, that's when a person is most at risk for really suffering for who they are" (Georgia Tech, 2011). Through these narratives, the rural/small town becomes a locus of confinement and corruption, a site where established institutions that are supposed to protect their members, especially their children, are rhetorically crafted as unsafe. Furthermore,

established institutions that are commonly associated with rurality become places that hinder queer subjects from being "who they are." In this way, the *It Gets Better Project* upholds the gay imaginary's articulation of rurality as "a perpetual site of isolation and exclusion," as well as deception (Herring, 2010, p. 10).

These small towns are illustrated as unstable sites of danger and unpredictability. The narratives problematize the notion of stability as an anchor of authenticity by unveiling the precariousness of rural life. As rhetorically illustrated, small towns are articulated through a constant threat of discovery and exposure, leading queer narrators to keep hidden their "authentic" identities. The looming threat of violence maintains queer identity's instability within the space of the rural.

The project also disrupts articulations of authenticity with "truth" or "honesty" as associated with the small town/rurality in direct proportion to the extent to which queer individuals are compelled to repress, deny, or erase their identities in these settings. One of the ways the narratives defy cultural assumptions of the honesty and authenticity of the small town is by depicting the rural as a place of gay suppression and denial. Laura retells her experiences growing up in rural Mississippi as a time when she desperately tried to obtain opposite-sex attraction. She says, "I wanted nothing more than to make myself normal so that God would love me again and so that I didn't have to hide myself to my friends and family" (Laura, 2011). The small town is depicted as a place where queer individuals had to "hide" their "authentic" selves from their community members. Petroralice Treurnicht says, "It's not easy to embrace the truth of our lives. It's not easy to love ourselves when a whole community, when a whole society, when even your family looks upon you as something that's unnatural and disgusting and shameful"

(Petroralice, 2012). Articulating rurality as a place of isolation implies that gay community cannot be found or made in small towns, and, therefore, queer people must relocate in order to find acceptance and community. Moreover, because LGBTQ people live in various regions and locales, the lack of "out" queer peers within the rural implies a necessary erasure or suppression of that identity.

The convention of authenticity, as tied to honesty, as a hallmark of the small town is further challenged to the extent that queer individuals must perform conventional, "appropriate" gender and sexuality, in contrast to their authentic identities. Deception further constitutes queer identity in rurality through the emergent theme of living a "dual life," that is, a constrained performance of conventional gender, heterosexuality, and/or heteronormativity. This forced duality, which defies authenticity by definition, paints the small town as a dishonest and inauthentic place. As a San Francisco police officer describes, without necessarily being told to hide his queer self, he faced pressure to stay in the closet. The police officer says, "I knew, absolutely, that I wasn't supposed to talk about it" (SFPD, 2012). Another police officer echoes the idea of keeping secret queer desire; he describes his perception of his prescribed life as, "A wife, two children, a picket fence. No one needed to know about this other little part of my life" (SFPD, 2012). One McKesson employee voices the immense anxiety caused by trying to keep his queerness secret. He says, "Living a dual life, which I think is something a lot of lesbians, gays, and transgenders do, you're always on guard. 'What have I told these people?' 'What do these people know about me?'" (McKesson employees, 2012). These narratives voice the cultural presumption that queer identity should be rejected, or at the very least, kept hidden from the rest of society. The narratives implicate a culture of homophobia in

voicing participants' hesitancy and fear about coming out as LGBTQ. While revealing the pressure queer individuals face to conform to heterosexuality, the narratives also rearticulate identity within the space of the small town as deceptive and inauthentic. Established institutions are arrayed and aligned in sophisticated ways through the narratives to ensure this dishonesty and maintain a façade of what is "true" or "right."

Notably, although narratives' depiction of established communities and institutions counters dominant heterosexual assumptions, they also disregard the ways that rural men have desired each other in these inherited places. Where established communities have largely been dismissed as ruralized and conservative—country, God, church, home, family, and community—historian John Howard examines these as the very places where men had sex with other men and queer resistances were found. While these sites may have resisted a queer presence, they also served as malleable sites for queer interaction. Howard (1999) writes, "Queerness began at home" (p. 40), as the home is not just an ideological space, but also a "material site with distinct propensities" (p. 41). Howard's research confirms the *It Gets Better Project* narratives' collective contention that small towns are sites of enforced deceit and duplicity rather than of authenticity and "truth."

The culmination of these narratives around authenticity in rural spaces is absence: absence of queerness and role models. A lack of stability, honesty, and reflective traditions means a lack of history for queers in these spaces. A staff member at Bay Area Video Coalition (BAVC) says:

> Living in the Midwest, growing up in a small town, I met a bunch of different types of people, but there was no one around me who was queer or queer identified. I just hadn't been given many opportunities to find my own

> community. I didn't find people around me who seemed like they were like me. I was really frustrated. I got really depressed. (BAVC, 2011)

Participants within the video project voice feelings of isolation growing up in small towns devoid of queer individuals and queer community. Although the *It Gets Better Project* troubles tradition and institutions, it also denies these ways of building community to rural-identified queers. While nonmetropolitan places are articulated as lacking queer peers for LGBTQ youth, they are also significantly illustrated as lacking queer institutions and adult role models to be used as resources for imagining queer youth's futurity within their geographical environment. Not having icons, or memories, of queerness points to queer identity as lacking an accessible history. Several San Francisco police officers recount their experiences: "I didn't really have any positive gay role models that I thought were out there," "All of the imagery that was associated with gays or lesbians was the limp-wristed hair dresser," "Someone that you were supposed to laugh at or someone that was supposed to be ridiculed," "So I didn't have anything that showed me that it was ok to be who I am" (SFPD, 2012). Instead of authenticity, queer absence is the culmination in the small town. The vocalized lack of queer role models, peers, and institutions deny notions of tradition to rural-identified queers. By articulating the rural as a place of queer absence, the narratives rob the small town of a history of queer identity and desire. Interestingly, while the *It Gets Better Project* performs a contemporary queer oral history project, it simultaneously erases queer bodies, performances, and desires from particular geographical spaces.

To Be Real

If authenticity as connected to rurality is troubled in the *It Gets Better* narratives, it is salvaged in relation to an urban imaginary. In specific contrast to the depiction of the rural as inauthentic, urbanity is implied as a "beacon of tolerance," (Herring, 2010, p. 13) a place where rural queers can flee to and finally "be who we are" (Nick, 2010). In this sense, the urban is contrasted with the rural as the social space that allows for the development of authentic queer identities, thus retaining a traditional aspect of authenticity: honesty. Nick, who has lived in Chicago for 3 years, describes his queer community; he says, "All of us had made these personal journeys, many of us through some hardships and hard times, to get to where we are, to get to be in a place where we can be together and be who we are" (Nick, 2010). Nick credits Chicago for allowing him the geographical and social space to be his authentic, honest self. Notably, Nick's narrative illustrates his journey to authenticity as one that demanded him to start from scratch. Hard work and suffering underwrite authenticity and this "must always be performed to be recognized and accepted as such" (Rodman, 2006, p. 106). Employees at Pixar also assert the symbolic power of the metropolis in constituting better, happier, and truer queer lives. A Pixar employee details what he would have missed if he had committed suicide; he says, "An entire future that was genuine. I would have missed an authentic way of living" (Pixar employees, 2010). In this way, authenticity retains traditional notions of honesty, and is simultaneously reconfigured as a characteristic that must be earned through individual hard work.

Moreover, the notion of having to find an authentic self is perhaps best illustrated through the line, "I found a new me, and it was the right me this time" (Pixar employees,

2010). In giving voice to the need to find this true identity and then inhabit it, the narrator both asserts the idea that queer identity must be found by creative agents and troubles the notion of authenticity by debunking essential notions of the self. Further, as Stockton (2009) notes, in order for the queer individual to emerge, the straight self has to die (pp. 6-7). Arguably, "the right me" refers to queer identity, while the implied "wrong me" was the self formed through constraints of rurality. In this way, the metropolis is positioned as the place where authentic identities are found through rejecting traditional identifications.

Authenticity is further redefined through narrators' rejection of simplicity and tradition in constituting honest selves. In their places, video participants rearticulate authenticity to signify diversity and fluidity. Accordingly, the city is held up within the narratives as a place where multiplicity is welcome. Janet Mock says, "I've since moved from Hawaii to New York where I can say that I've finally found my people. I have a boyfriend who I love, friends who love me just as I am, despite my past, despite everything" (Mock, 2011). As a transgender woman of color, Mock was able to find a community that supported her multiple identities in New York City. In line with crediting diversity as a fundamental component of authenticity, one narrator says, "Don't limit yourself. You really can do whatever you want to do" (Text 100 Public Relations, 2012). Asserting a narrative of the city as a fundamentally nurturing and diverse place, another Text 100 employee says, "I grew up in a really supportive environment in the San Francisco bay area and I was incredibly lucky to have supportive parents who didn't care bout my sexual orientation or who I loved or who I wanted to be with" (Text 100 Public Relations, 2012). As stated, diverse communities support difference and cultivate

authentic identities. In this way, the *It Gets Better Project* rejects the rural imaginary of authenticity as simple.

Other qualities of authenticity as conventionally imagined are summarily rejected as tradition is traded in for creativity and innovation. With the absence of role models and peers, queer identity is illustrated as a novel construction created by the individual. A Google employee says, "When I was a teenager, if someone had told me that in 10 years I'd be living in California or that I would have a boyfriend, both of those things would seem equally strange and impossible" (Google employees). The Google employee "lifted himself up by his bootstraps," so to speak, and got himself to a city, a boyfriend, and a career. Like many videos, the narrative here valorizes individual perseverance and ingenuity. The queer individual is crafted as a creative agent, one whose possibilities are endless. Laura describes her life after moving out of rural Mississippi: "Today I have a good job, I served my country in the military, I'm in graduate school, and my partner and I have an amazing relationship, really a great life" (Laura, 2011). The city is poised to remove the individual from the isolation of the small town by providing her or him with creativity, truth, and community.

Furthermore, created communities, which feature individual agency and artistry, are rearticulated as more authentic than established, conventional, "legitimate" communities. Savage says, "There really is a place for us, there really is a place for you and one day you will have friends who love and support you. You will find love. You will find a community" (Dan & Terry, 2010). A "real" community is one that you must find and create, as opposed to one that you inherit. In contrast to inherited communities, queer communities signify individual agency and creativity in crafting and defining

community. One narrator says, "If you're stuck in some isolated town in the middle of nowhere, the second you turn 18, leave. Go marry somebody and go move to Boston, go move to San Francisco. Gay marriage is going to be everywhere in the next 5 years, fingers crossed" (Text 100 Public Relations, 2012). Idealized gay communities are seen as creative and progressive, and this explicitly maps onto queer identity. Seeking, forging, and creating communities are some of the ways that gay individuals constitute themselves as gay.

Along with communities, traditions and institutions are reimagined through a city-based construction of queer identity. Namely, the family is rearticulated as an unstable and fluid site. Scholars have noted that queer familial affiliations challenge conventional notions of a family designated by biology and resist allegations that chosen[8] families are derivatives of straight "blood" families. Weston (1991) writes, "Many lesbians and gay men alluded to the difficulty and excitement of constructing kinship in the *absence* of what they called 'models'" (p. 116). Screen name UntitledSymphony says, "Once you're out of high school you can find an environment that will support you, an environment where you can be happy, where you can find people that will be there for you, and accept you, and love you for who you are" (UntitledSymphony, 2010). Where families are often the source of queer youth's trauma in the narratives, advocating "finding people who love you" encourages queer youth to seek, create, and engage in authentic relationships with others, which marks queer identity as creative and mobile, and also reimagines the family

[8] Scholars have noted the bourgeois individualism engrained within the notion of "choice." As Weston points out, "Only after coming out to blood relatives emerged as a historical possibility could the element of selection in kinship become isolated in gay experience and subsequently elevated to a constitutive feature of gay families" (Weston, 1991, p. 111).

as a product of this innovation. Thus, LGBTQ youth viewing the video can also constitute themselves as agents in imagining life getting better for them through mobility away from their current place.

Mobility away from rural places, then, is necessary to collective queer identity. Importantly, there is a valorizing of the individual and a demonization of conformity. Additionally, narrators' literal movement away from their established communities and toward created ones marks place as being predicated on identity, as opposed to an identity predicated on place. Subsequently, queer family structures include multiple arrangements and fluid boundaries, reflective of the house mothers and fathers made up of drag queens, transgender women, and gay men in *Paris is Burning,* to building family around close friends, to gay men's camp usage of the word "sister." Creating new family structures is important for queer identity as many queer individuals experience the trauma of being rejected by their families because of their sexuality (Cramer & Gilson, 1999, p. 23). As Google employee says, "Even when my family couldn't be there to support me because they didn't know I was gay or I hadn't told them or even after I came out and things were still kind of difficult with them, I knew I could rely on my friends and that's where they became my family" (Google employees, 2011). Family is redefined as a structure that is created by those who wish to care for and after those within it. Similarly, a BAVC employee points to the constructed nature of queer family; she says, "Things get better for me when I have a good family and good friends and a healthy environment to be in. I really believe that that's what it takes to have a great life" (BAVC, 2011). Queer reconfigurations of family point to the fluidity and transience of queer family and

identity. Additionally, these narratives articulate created family as a more authentically loving and caring family.

While many narrators define community through an alignment with the metropolis, other participants expand community beyond material place and embodiment, an extreme variation on the theme of mobility and transience as opposed to stability and fixity, especially as relevant to place. The framing of global communities within the narratives illustrates queer identity as mobile, transient, and fluid. One narrator says, "You might be able to cultivate a different kind of community with your friends… or somebody who, on Facebook, from another city, you start becoming a pen pal, and they become part of your family as an ally" (BAVC, 2011). Here, the narrator redefines community to include global strangers. Within this reconfiguration, one aspect of created community that remains in both place-based definitions and through the public screen is the notion of community encapsulating other queer people. In this way, community is untethered from roots in local, established institutions and also from city-based, created cultures, to include global queers of all geographies. Global communities, therefore, signify queer identity as mobile and diverse. Allan Spyere says, "It's very comforting for me to know that now our kids can turn to *The Trevor Project*[9] or *A Note to My Kid*[10] or any other website or support group so that they can know that it's ok to be themselves

[9] A national organization that focuses on suicide prevention and crisis intervention for LGBTQ youth

[10] *A Note to My Kid* "gives the LGBTQ community, their parents, family, and friends the opportunity to share their unconditional love with one another" through writing letters to loved ones and posting them onto the website.

and to be gay" (Bears San Diego, 2011). Authenticity is articulated with mobility, fluidity, transience—even virtuality—asserting unfixedness in relation to place.

Furthermore, in describing queer identity as constituted by creating community and/or finding a tribe, queer subjectivity is rearticulated as novel, diverse, and mobile. Within the narratives, the insistence on finding and creating new ways of being queer situates local and global queerness into a historical vacuum, and also "assumes an amazingly uncomplicated relationship between claiming an identity and feeling a sense of belonging or community" (Weston, 1991, p. 124). Privileging one category for organizing all subjective experience may force individuals into the impossible choice of deciding which identity category defines them. Furthermore and relatedly, the narratives construct queer identity through agency and mobility, which entails certain privileges; namely, the promise that a new place outside of established race and class communities will be a better place for queer youth may hold much despair for individuals not privileged along race and class lines. Complicating the gay ideal of metropolitan life with a multiplicity of identities makes apparent its privileging of a gay identity over others. As Chicana feminist Cherrie Moraga (1982) writes, "The danger lies in ranking the oppressions" (p. 29). Through the stories of queer "experts," LGBTQ youth are given a vision of futurity that, while rhetorically crafting queer identity as diverse and authentic, asserts a narrow image of a city-based, economically privileged identity.

Conclusion

The *It Gets Better Project* rearticulates dominant cultural presumptions of the rural as a site of tradition, simplicity, and stability. Invoking a metronormative frame, the

narratives disrupt the dominant imaginary of rural authenticity, exposing it instead as corrupt and deceptive. While traditional institutions of family and religion are reframed as inauthentic, they are also revealed to be precariously unstable as sites of compulsive heteronormative performances. Problematically, in denouncing these institutions as unwelcoming and hostile towards queer individuals, the *It Gets Better Project* establishes that no traditions are available in the rural for queers, not even role models.

Authenticity is significantly reimaged in the narratives through a rhetorical rearticulation of a city-based queer identity. Through the rejection of tradition, simplicity, and stability--qualities of a rural authenticity--the metropolis becomes a symbol for diversity and ingenuity. In this way, the urban becomes a symbolic site of better, more authentic queer lives and communities. Authenticity is further contingent on queer mobility, work, and creativity, thus valorizing individual agency and resourcefulness. Notably, while the city offers the conditions for love, that is, the conditions for the individual to cobble community, love, acceptance, and authenticity, narratives expressing sexuality remain absent in all locales. The project's construction of queer identity thus privileges spirit over body, and this is underscored by the fact that, as alluded to in the prior chapter, sexuality—as opposed to sexual identity—is elided in these narratives: authenticity evidently does not include the body in this regard. Insofar as this authentic queer identity is reimagined as fluid, creative, and diverse, queer subjects are also denied access to a queer history. The erasure of queer role models, peers, and traditions articulate ahistoricity as a prominent feature of the small town by dint of an imaginary of authenticity. Ironically, the reimagination of authenticity within the city as a product of innovation and transience asserts queer identity as ahistorical.

CONCLUSION

Following a string of highly publicized gay youth suicides, Dan Savage and his husband Terry Miller took a page out of Harvey Milk's story: You gotta give 'em hope. Savage and Miller uploaded an 8-minute Youtube video retelling their experiences growing up, being bullied, finding each other, and adopting their son, culminating in the overall message that life gets better for queer youth if they just "tough out" their childhoods. Hoping to inspire submissions from other LGBTQ-identified adults, Savage wrote in his *Savage Love* column:

> Today we have the power to give these kids hope. We have the tools to reach out to them and tell our stories and let them know that it does get better. But many LGBT youth can't picture what their lives might be like as openly gay adults. They can't imagine a future for themselves. So let's show them what our lives are like, let's show them what the future may hold in store for them. (Savage, 2010, p.1)

Over 2 years later, the video project now has over 40,000 user-created videos viewed 40 million times, with more videos created every day. Including participants from corporate employees to politicians, BYU students to San Francisco Police Officers, the *It Gets Better Project*, and subsequent book and hour-long MTV special of the same name, has had incredible resonance with the national public.

More than providing hope to LGBTQ youth and validating queer identity, the project has brought mainstream awareness to the previously ignored culture of antigay bullying. Indeed, since the project's inception, several schools have adopted policies that

"affirm the dignity and self-worth of students," including students who identify as, or are perceived to be, LGBTQ (Eckholm, 2012, p. 1). While it is hasty to presume the *It Gets Better Project* is responsible for these policy changes, the ripples the project has caused in the social discourse around antigay bullying, particularly in sparking discussion of childhood sexual identity, a culturally taboo topic, among politicians, educators, and in the media are undeniable.

The *It Gets Better Project* warrants analysis particularly because it has produced a cultural moment where members of both the LGBTQ community and the dominant heterosexual public are addressing queer identity in a positive way. As Brookey and Westerfelhaus (2001) write, "If positive representations signify a refiguration of cultural boundaries… the queer media critic should determine how the cross-over of queer experience into mainstream culture is negotiated. More important, the queer media critic should also determine the conditions of the negotiation" (p. 152). In this respect, while the project presents a challenge to the dominant heterosexual order, I argue its resistive power is tempered through a rhetoric that marginalizes queer experience.

My analysis yields a problematic of queerness articulated around place, specifically through the rhetorical anchors of safety, innocence, and authenticity. Queer identity is rhetorically asserted in interesting and revealing ways in relation to the symbolics of urbanity and rurality. Tracing the discourse of safety, the narratives tie the physical and social characteristics of the city with the social characteristics of queer individuals in any and all locations. Significantly, as the metropolis is rhetorically centered as a glamorous place of creativity and uniqueness, these qualities are explicitly asserted as innate to queer identity. In direct contrast, rurality comes to signify hostility,

danger, and conformity, reifying metronormative assumptions. The queer individual emerges from these associations with the city as a creative agent, yet one whose self-worth is conflated with work, and more specifically, power and profit. Subsequently, the individual is valorized in ways that align with neoliberal logics: salvation through work and, implicitly, redemption through consumption. Furthermore, through the rhetorical axis of innocence, culturally received notions of childhood innocence are troubled and inverted, revealing childhood as not innocent, pure, or chaste. In this inversion, queer adulthood retains the mythical wonder of childhood; queer adulthood in the city maintains the wonder, magic, and social validation that was absent for the narrators in their youth. While these associations seem to elevate queer adulthood as an ideal too good to be true, they are also contingent upon a glaring absence of queer sexuality. In other words, the love, magic, and discovery rearticulated with queer identity are contingent on the suppression and erasure of queer sexuality in both youth and adulthood. The *It Gets Better Project* similarly reimagines authenticity, such that conventional notions that turn on tradition and stability, which are strongly articulated with rurality and/or small towns, are disrupted. Authenticity is instead articulated with diversity, fluidity, creativity, mobility and, importantly, with the metropolis. The reimagination of authenticity that the project performs necessarily crafts queerness as ahistorical, as queer youth are charged with the responsibility to (re)create traditions and models.

Through the rhetorical anchors of safety, innocence, and authenticity, queer identity is crafted as exclusively actualized in the space of the metropolis. Notably, the agency, creativity, asexuality, and ahistoricity of queerness that are articulated in the *It Gets Better Project* valorize queerness, but specifically in ways that reify marginality and

serve to contain sexuality. A queer "tribe" is emergent across these narratives in ways that ensure containment via homogenized "specialness." The project thus accomplishes a narrative or "script" (Appiah, 1996, p. 97) of queer identity, but that script is limited and accordingly also marked by a sort of homogeneity or leveling. The script produced within the *It Gets Better Project* necessarily implies certain privileges. The crafting of a bildungsroman to imagine a generic trajectory towards full queer adult stature that turns on a rural-to-urban solution ignores the complexities of raced, classed, and gendered intersections, as well as the despair that may be caused by leaving established homes. Moreover, the racial logistics of metronormative narratives often reinforce whiteness as a "normative ideal," one that configures "an image of ideality and normativity that structures gay male [and female] desires and communities" (Muñoz, 1998 p. 129; as cited in Herring, 2010, p. 15). For some LGBTQ individuals, particularly for queers of color and working class queers, the promise of a gay homeland ultimately leads to disappointments. As Marlon Riggs illuminates in his cinematic critique of the Castro, the "great gay mecca" was "no longer my home, my mecca (never was, in fact)" (Riggs, 1989). Subsequently, the urban environment glamorized in this narrative also ignores the more profound implications of isolation for marginalized individuals. Individuals privileged along race and class lines, for examples, may not experience the alienation of leaving one's cultural community. As Dorothy Allison (1994) illustrates, there may be much despair in leaving "home" for LGBTQ individuals raised in working-class communities who move to the city, citing feelings of placelessness and nonbelonging (p. 33). Analyzing the narratives through an intersectional lens reveals that the project does

not queer the dominant discourse of sexuality but, instead, homogenizes queer experience.

Significantly, while the project in effect marginalizes queer identity, it also works to celebrate the margin. In articulating queer identity with almost superhuman qualities—queerness is at once filled with love, acceptance, validation, creativity, ingenuity, magic, diversity, and mobility—the narratives elevate queer individuals above the human. While this may seem positive, Brookey and Westerfelhaus note that "deification" is a process that ultimately serves to dehumanize the group being held up as superior and remove them from the mainstream (Brookey & Westerfelhaus, 2001, p. 150). Like stereotypes, aligning queer identity with an unrealistic superior collective script demands that queer individuals be always on their "best behavior" (Brookey & Westerfelhaus, 2001, p. 143). In this narrow constitution, LGBTQ individuals are permitted to be creative Apple geniuses and remarkably successful, fulfilled, and productive citizens; however, they are denied access to and acknowledgement of their sexuality. In this way, the valorization in the *It Gets Better Project* is arguably conditional on queer asexuality and queer ahistoricity.

Notably, as the majority of these narratives of valorization are produced by self-identified members of the LGBTQ community, the project realizes Foucault's notion of self-surveillance (Foucault, 1977, p. 177). Indeed, the narrators police themselves in retelling experiences of constituting "superior" qualities of queer identity and remaining silent on sexuality. Consequently, heteronormativity is not troubled—it gets transferred onto place. Heteronormativity is not articulated as problematic in the great gay urban

mecca, rather, it gets folded into a romantic imaginary of "diversity." In this way, queerness is further contained and tamed throughout the *It Gets Better Project*.

Although deification provides one lens of analysis through which to study the implications of "positive" portrayals of queer individuals, there may be multiple ways of reading the project as may be troubled through a larger sample size of videos. This suggests that further studies are needed into critical queer media studies and positive representations of queerness. Particularly, more research regarding identity constitution through the rhetoric of place may reveal more localized and fluid constructions of queerness.

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